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Effective Principals' Perceptions of Superintendents' Instructional Leadership Beliefs, Knowledge, and Practices

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Effective Principals' Perceptions of Superintendents' Instructional Leadership Beliefs, Knowledge, and Practices

By

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Dedication

This body of work is dedicated to my beloved children. Always remember, in God, there are no limits, no barriers and no ceilings. He has made each of you gifted and powerful. Go forth and change the world!

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First, I give honor and thanks to God for downloading into me the will and desire to go through this journey. I thank Him for wisdom, knowledge and understanding. Without Him, I am nothing.

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To my mother, you instilled in me the belief that education was valuable and necessary. Thank you for pushing me to realize my greatest potential. I'm not done yet. There's so much more to come.

Everything is possible for one who believes. – Mark 9:23 (NIV)

Effective Principals' Perceptions of Superintendents' Instructional Leadership Beliefs, Knowledge, and Practices

by

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This study uses a qualitative methodology to examine effective principal's perceptions of the instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices of superintendents and how they impact student achievement and influence principal's instructional leadership. The study was set in a large, urban school district. Six principals who met the selection criteria as highly effective were chosen as study participants. As the instructional leaders of their schools and subordinates to the superintendent, principals are uniquely positioned to provide valuable insight on their perceptions of superintendents as instructional leaders. The study answered the following research questions: How do effective principals in large, urban school districts in Texas, (1) describe instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices of superintendents? (2) perceive the impact of their superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices on student achievement? (3) describe how superintendent's beliefs, knowledge, and practices as an instructional leader influence their own beliefs, knowledge, and practices as it

relates to instructional leadership? (4) make sense of the instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices of their superintendent? Findings from this study may be used to provide greater clarity to superintendents and school boards members, regarding the role of the superintendent as an instructional leader and the specific beliefs, knowledge, and practices positively impacting student achievement and influencing principal's instructional leadership.

Key words: Superintendent instructional leadership. Beliefs. Knowledge. Practices.

Table of Contents

Tables

Figures

Chapter 1: Introduction and Context of the Study

Educational reform strategies, such as No Child Left Behind (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), ushered in new expectations for educational accountability. With these new expectations came a heightened sense of urgency among district stakeholders that has yet to subside. School board members continue to demand rapid increases in student test scores, innovative programs to put more students on track to college and careers, improved talent management tactics, and progressive policy initiatives. These expectations exist in the climate of increased accountability, stringent superintendent-board member relationships, deteriorating resources, and an increase in the turnover rate of individuals in the superintendent's seat (Bell, 2015; Byrd, Drews, & Johnson, 2006; Weiss, Templeton, Thompson, & Tremont, 2015).

Changes in the educational landscape suggest the need for added clarity around the role of the superintendent and their instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices, influencing principals' instructional leadership and ultimately, leading to gains in student academic achievement. Scholars such as Peterson and Barnett (2003), however, admit the research surrounding the role of the superintendent fluctuates due to the lens through which various researchers analyze the role, the sources of literature studied, and the interpretations of the literature. In order to understand the superintendent's role in increasing student's academic achievement, researchers must first consider the varying descriptions of the superintendent's position since its inception more than 150 years ago (Kowalski, 2005). While there are many approaches to researching the role of the superintendent, the literature review for the proposed study will utilize a developmental approach, which is based on the notion that the superintendent's role has matured over time. While some overlap of the various stages can be

seen, this approach is the most efficient way of analyzing the literature (Tyack & Hansot, 1982). Nevertheless, this approach does not alter the fact that the current literature on the instructional leadership role of superintendents is limited. Going beyond the literature by gathering and analyzing the perceptions of effective principals is useful in order to gain additional insight on the instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices of superintendents.

Principals' perceptions are valuable data because principals are the individuals at the school level most directly impacted by the superintendent's decision-making. Their perceptions of superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices help fill the present void in the literature. In taking a step to fill that void, the study sought to analyze effective principal's perceptions of their superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices. This chapter will outline the rationale, purpose, problem statement, and research questions of the study. An overview of the methodological approach, which includes the epistemology, methodology, and research questions is also outlined. The assumptions and significance of the study are discussed followed by definitions of key terms.

Statement of the Problem

As accountability measures strengthen across the nation and the global achievement gap widens (Wagner, 2014), the role of the superintendent becomes even more vital to the success of a school district. Principals need a leader who will continue to evolve with the increased demands of the superintendent's role. There is a plethora of literature related to the instructional leadership of effective principals (e.g., Bynelson, 2014; Cumming, 2013; Mendels, 2012); however, in consideration of the school superintendent's role, the body of literature becomes much more lacking. The lack of attention given to the topic of the superintendent as an

instructional leader is unexpected because of the gravity of the superintendent's position and responsibility within a school district (Kowalski, 2005).

Studying the instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices of superintendents presents some challenges to the researcher (Davidson, 2005). Questionnaires, interviews, direct observations of subjects, and examining records are the methods most often used to gather data in research conducted on superintendent's instructional leadership (Bridges, 1982). A notable observation in Bridges' findings is, often times, superintendents themselves provided the information used in the data collection process, which can be questionable. For example, Kowalski (1995) noted the urban superintendents he studied tended to speak of their ideal roles, such as those involving instructional leadership, rather than the political and managerial roles that consume their time and attention. Without an understanding of the instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices of superintendents from the lens of the leaders most closely connected to both the school level and the role of the superintendent (i.e., principals), the body of research on this topic will continue to be void of the clarity needed to explain superintendents' instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices and the impact on student's academic achievement.

In defining instructional leadership, researchers (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Reeves, 2002; Smith & Andrews, 1989) have made the connection between the success of a school and the principal's instructional leadership. What is not as observable in the literature is the connection between the superintendent's instructional leadership and a school district's success in the area of student academic achievement. This type of connection is even less prevalent in research specifically concerning the instructional leadership of urban school

superintendents (e.g.,, Mitchell, 2011). This is a timely topic in education; as the level of accountability for superintendents continues to increase, the need for individuals in this role to act as managers as well as instructional leaders is illuminated (Houston, 2008). Jones and Howley's (2009) study of more than 900 superintendents revealed superintendents in urban school districts spend the majority of their time involved in managerial work rather than instructional leadership. Participants in the study could articulate in detail what types of managerial tasks they engaged in on a day-to-day basis; however, the same level of clarity was not evident in describing their own instructional leadership practices. An interesting finding of the study was the more stringent the superintendent perceived the state to be towards accountability, the more time the superintendent spent focusing on duties related to instructional leadership. This data demonstrates the need for superintendents to act as instructional leaders, particularly in districts where there is a high level of accountability for improved student achievement outcomes. However, even the superintendents working under those circumstances could not describe their instructional leadership beliefs and knowledge or the specific practices they engaged in on a routine basis (Jones & Howley, 2009).

This study uses the research conducted by Waters and Marzano (2006) as a framework to better understand the superintendent's practices that positively impact student academic achievement. The framework evolved from a meta-analysis examining approximately 30 quantitative studies of school district leader's impact on student achievement outcomes. The present study will use this framework to describe and analyze perceptions of effective principals regarding the instructional leadership practices of superintendents. Utilizing a framework that is inclusive of superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices is not an

available option due to the limited amount of literature on the superintendent's beliefs and knowledge. After a discussion of the study's findings, a new conceptual model will be presented to include the findings on the superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices. The new conceptual model will be used to make recommendations to school district leaders, school boards, and post-secondary institutions about how to better improve academic outcomes for students from the superintendent's seat.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine effective principals' perceptions of superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices and how they impact student's academic achievement outcomes and influence principal's instructional leadership. Findings from this research are needed to provide greater clarity to superintendents and school board members alike around the role of the superintendent as an instructional leader, and the specific beliefs, knowledge, and practices effective principals perceive as necessary to lead to an increase in student academic achievement outcomes and influence their own instructional leadership. Findings from this research add to the body of literature on the superintendent as an instructional leader, which can be studied in educational administration and superintendent preparation programs.

Assumptions

It can be speculated that one of the most vital job functions assigned to the school superintendent by the school board is to increase student academic achievement outcomes. This study is based on the assumption that in order to have a positive impact on students' academic achievement outcomes, school superintendents must first be instructional leaders. By definition,

as an instructional leader, it is assumed that school superintendents have a significant amount of influence over principals, teachers, and what happens in the schools as it relates to academics. In large, urban school districts there is often a mid-level principal supervisor reporting directly to the superintendent whose role is to work directly with principals on issues related to instructional leadership (Casterly, Lewis, Simon, Uzzell & Palacios, 2013). At times, this could mean that the school principal has very little interaction with the school superintendent directly. Therefore, in some cases, perceptions would be formed via principal's indirect experiences with the superintendent as an instructional leader. Another assumption of this study is that the principals acting as participants have had direct experiences with the phenomena of superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices.

Research Questions

This study examines effective principals' (defined in the definitions section at the end of this chapter) perceptions of the instructional leadership of urban superintendents, how they impact student academic achievement outcomes and influence principal's instructional leadership. For effective principals in a large, urban school district in Texas, this study answers the following research questions:

How do effective principals in large, urban school districts in Texas,

1. describe instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices of superintendents?
2. perceive the impact of their superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices on student achievement?

3. describe how superintendent's beliefs, knowledge, and practices as an instructional leader influence their own beliefs, knowledge, and practices as it relates to instructional leadership?
4. make sense of the instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices of their superintendent?

Research Design

This study utilizes a qualitative, research design to analyze and describe the perceptions of effective principals who have each experienced the phenomena of their superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices. This type of research design utilizes rich, thick descriptions gathered directly from the individuals experiencing the phenomena being studied. The study focuses on effective principals in a large, urban school district in Texas. Purposeful sampling was used to identify the participants for the study (Creswell, 2013). Semi-structured interviews were utilized to discover the participant's perceptions of the instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices of the superintendent, their impact on student academic achievement outcomes and influence on principal's instructional leadership (Creswell, 2003). Each interview was voice recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data analysis consisted of the examination of significant statements from which meaning was generated, leading to the development of a description capturing the "essence" of the phenomena (Moustakas, 1994). Qualitative coding techniques were used during which the data was chunked and placed into categories labeled with a term (a.k.a., *in vivo*) used in the actual language of the participant (Creswell, 2003).

Significance and Rationale

The superintendent must support campus-level leadership and is ultimately responsible for student success or student failure (Byrd, Drews, & Johnson, 2006). What specific beliefs, knowledge, and practices do superintendents engage in that impact student success or failure? This study is significant because it provides valuable insight into the answer to that question. It examines the perceptions of effective principals, those who are most directly impacted by the superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices. The data is grounded in principals' lived experiences of their superintendent as instructional leader.

As a result of this study, school boards may choose to revisit the evidence they collect when evaluating their superintendent. They may also examine the skillsets they look for when hiring a superintendent to align more closely with the academic achievement needs of students in the district. Superintendents may choose to make adjustments to their beliefs, knowledge, and practices as instructional leaders to more closely align to the findings of this study as deemed necessary according to the context of their school district. Post-secondary institutions may adjust their program offerings and the content of the coursework being offered to reflect the findings of this study thereby ensuring they are training aspiring superintendents to be more effective instructional leaders in their school districts.

Definition of Terms

Effective principal: Effective principals are those who boost academic achievement for all students, increase the effectiveness of their teaching staffs, and consistently take leadership actions shown to improve outcomes for students (Whitehead, Boschee, & Decker, 2012). In this study, an *effective principal* will be defined as an individual who (1) has been a principal for a

minimum of seven consecutive years and (2) has led a school with an exemplary track record of high student performance as evidenced by local, state and national awards received, distinctions earned in the state's student's exemplary performance on state tests over a period of time and state accountability distinctions received.

Instructional leadership: An influence relationship that motivates, enables, and supports teachers' efforts to learn about and change their instructional practices (Spillane, Hallett, & Diamond, 2003).

School superintendent: The leader of a school district who is ultimately responsible for all ten functions of school districts (Olivarez, 2013).

Student academic achievement outcomes: Student performance indicators on statewide, standardized tests, such as the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2016a).

Summary

This chapter briefly introduced the role of the superintendent in the age of educational accountability post-No Child Left Behind by describing the need for superintendents to do more in their role as instructional leaders. A brief overview of the study's methodology was provided in addition to a statement of the researcher assumptions, research questions, the significance and rationale of the study, and a definition of terms. The chapter that follows will examine the relevant literature on the evolution of the role of the superintendent, discuss the findings of the research on principals and instructional leadership, and discuss the findings from the study, the research on the instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices of superintendents.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter provides a review of the relevant literature related to the evolution of the superintendent's role, the impact of increased educational accountability on the role of the superintendent, models of instructional leadership, and findings from studies conducted on the instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices of superintendents. The depth of research conducted on the school principal as an instructional leader is addressed in this chapter as a way of highlighting the lack of research on the superintendent as an instructional leader. The chapter begins with a discussion on the evolution of the role of the superintendent from the first conceptualization of the role to a discussion on the 21st century superintendent.

Evolution of the Role of the Superintendent

Barnard (1968) defined leadership as one's ability to influence the behavior of subordinates and persuade them to follow a specific course of action. During the late 1830s, a new school leadership position was born, the role of the superintendent. Initially, the superintendent was perceived as a person operating as the school board's clerk (Carter & Cunningham, 1997). This concept of the superintendent's role existed in 13 school districts for what scholars think was more than two decades (Barnard, 1968). The superintendent performed tasks such as answering phones and filing away paper. This was primarily because school boards were hesitant to release their power and authority to the district superintendent for fear that they would lose control of their decision-making power (Barnard, 1968). Over time the superintendent's role evolved due to an expanding state curriculum and policies resulting in increased accountability. In his book on the evolution of the superintendency, Kowalski (2005) names five future conceptualizations of the superintendent's role: the superintendent as a

teacher-scholar, manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, and communicator. Varying aspects of the initial view on the superintendent's position can be used in describing the complex role of today's superintendent. The connections between past and present perceptions of the superintendent's role will be discussed later in the chapter.

The superintendent as teacher-scholar. The common schools movement, which sought to increase uniformity in courses and subjects being taught across all states, propelled superintendents into the role of a *teacher-scholar (*Kowalski, 2005). The conceptualization of the superintendent as a teacher-scholar was built on the premise that superintendents were instructional leaders. They were seen as master teachers whose work directly impacted teachers rather than principals (Callahan, 1966). Their primary responsibility was to increase teacher capacity through a hands-on approach to strengthening pedagogy (Spring, 1994). At this time, individuals in these roles did not see themselves as being politicians or managers (Kowalski, 2005).

Today, school superintendents have a less hands-on approach to teacher development. For example, a typical urban school superintendent does not conduct teacher professional development or provide coaching and support for teachers in the classrooms. These types of tasks are reserved for the school principal. However, because of the stature of the position, the instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices of a superintendent can be highly influential. In a study on the frequency of superintendents' instructional leadership practices, out of 45 ranked practices, Mitchell (2011) concluded the practice of the superintendent most frequently observed by principals was the superintendent's positive attitude towards staff development. This superintendent practice was also ranked the highest in prior studies (e.g.,

Boyter, 1989; Clore, 1991) whereas principals ranked the observed instructional leadership practices and superintendents ranked their own practices. Bjork (1993) discussed the superintendent's indirect impact on instruction through decision-making in the areas of budgeting, curriculum development, teacher selection and retention, and principal oversight. In the process of principal oversight, superintendents hold principals accountable for the development of their teacher's instructional capacity. As the instructional leaders for their campuses, principals have become the new teacher-scholars.

The superintendent as manager. In the early 1900s, education met a new America. The uprising of new factories changed the demographic landscape of the nation, first producing urban areas and then large school districts. Those with political influence began to advocate for the need to introduce ideas from the Industrial Revolution into school administration (Callahan, 1966). The role of the superintendent as a manager evolved out of a growing concern regarding the superintendent's ability to effectively manage the growing, urban school districts. By 1920, superintendents were expected to be scientific managers who focused on time and efficiency as a strategy to meet educational goals (Tyack & Hansot, 1982). As managers, the superintendent's role included performing tasks such as creating and overseeing budgets and managing operational aspects of the school district such as personnel and facilities (Callahan, 1966). There was some opposition to this conceptualization of the role of superintendents. The pushback came from a place of fear. Political elites feared that superintendent-managers were more poised to work with businesses and the government and would eventually take full control of the school districts (Kowalski, 2005). The notion of power was new because, since the inception of the role, superintendents had not held any power; that would soon change.

The superintendent as democratic leader. Superintendents acquired power as they began to be perceived as democratic leaders during a period between 1930 and the mid-1950s (Kowalski, 2005). According to Bjork and Gurley (2005), being a democratic leader meant that the superintendent's role was one of an "astute political strategist." Fiscal resources for school districts were hard to come by in the 1930s, which mean superintendents needed to spend a significant portion of their time lobbying state legislatures and competing against other governmental services for resources (Kowalski, 2005). As the superintendent gained power and began directing certain support and attention to specific groups, the community began to feel like they were going unnoticed. In addition to lobbying government agencies, some politicians and educators advised superintendents to be mindful not to forget their greatest resource (Melby, 1955). Superintendents listened. By the mid-1950s, superintendents had the attention and the resources of a variety of stakeholder groups including policy makers, community leaders, and university professors. Superintendents had made their first leap into the world of politics**.**

The superintendent as applied social scientist. Being an *applied social scientist* in the mid-1950s and through the 1970s meant superintendents were to be savvy and skilled enough to address the social issues plaguing community members at the time such as poverty, racism, gender discrimination, and crime (Kowalski, 2005). It was expected that superintendents would conduct research to find solutions to these types of social problems and identify the most effective strategies in implementing those solutions. They were expected to be students of their professional practice and, when the answers did not exist, they were expected to conduct district studies that would help them identify the answers. This was a very different view of the role from previous normative practices.

Callahan (1966) notes four of the most influential factors leading to the conceptualization of the superintendent as an applied social scientist: growing dissatisfaction with democratic leadership after World War II, rapid development of the social sciences in the late 1940s and early 1950s, a resurgence of criticisms of public education in the 1950s, and the support of the Kellogg Foundation. The later was an interesting contributor to the applied social scientist movement. The Kellogg Foundation essentially donated money to colleges and universities in return for the ability to influence the research being conducted by school administration professors in the area of the social sciences. In many ways, the role of the superintendent as an applied social scientist can still be observed today. This is evident in studies (e.g., Foley, 2010; Vander, 2002) funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which focus on innovative initiatives being implemented by superintendents of urban school districts.

The superintendent as communicator. The role of the superintendent as a *communicator* first appeared in the 1980s as America transitioned from a manufacturing society to one where the workforce was becoming increasingly social with more human transactions (Kowalski, 2005). Communication became less about the district leader having a certain skillset and more about communication being a characteristic of an effective district leader. In an organization, what gets communicated, and how, determines what is perceived as being important. In essence, communication acts as an organizational symbol (Conrad, 1994). Symbols in an organization are represented within the rituals, ceremonies, values and stories told repeatedly over a period of time (Deal & Peterson, 1999). These symbols inspire and uplift those within the organization by providing hope, belief, direction, and a sense of belonging. Conrad (1994) wrote, "Cultures are communicative creations. They emerge and are sustained by the

communicative acts of all employees, not just the conscious persuasive strategies of upper management. Cultures do not exist separately from people communicating with one another" (p. 27). In essence, Conrad was making the claim that communication is culture and culture is communication.

Today's school superintendent communicates culture and what is important through, such events as the annual state of the school's address, through messages relayed in school board meetings, and in the strategic plan for the district's success. In the formative years of the superintendent's role, school board members did most of the communicating to key stakeholders while superintendents worked in the background (Kowalski, 2005). Today, superintendents work alongside their school board members to communicate with key stakeholders throughout the district. This regular communication positions the superintendent to be perceived as the district's most influential leader**.**

1983's A Nation at Risk

In 1983, while the role of the superintendent was in its fifth iteration, the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE) was on the brink of introducing its first national report on the state of public education. The report, *A Nation at Risk*, accomplished three major goals: (1) the report investigated the declining state of the educational system in America, as measured by high school student performance in the United States and other countries; (2) the report identified specific problem areas; and (3) the report offered multiple recommendations for improvement (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The report was a call to action highlighting concerning statistics with regards to the state of student academic achievement across the nation, illuminated the problems in the educational system, and advised

all stakeholders in the nation's public educational system on what each group could do to correct the problem at hand. The major recommendations were categorized under several headings: (1) content, (2) standards and expectations, (3) time, and (4) teaching were the first four headings (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 7).

A Nation at Risk's fifth heading, leadership and fiscal support, included a recommendation and a call to action specifically for superintendents. In this recommendation, the NCEE called on superintendents to be effective managers, supervisors, politicians, communicators, visionary goal-setters, and masters of persuasion. The NCEE recognized the superintendent as playing a "critical leadership role" in the successful implementation of each recommendation made in the report. The NCEE went as far as to make a public claim that the superintendent's ability to persuade the district's multiple stakeholders was needed in order to gain the community's backing towards the reform strategies proposed in the report (NCEE, 1983). The demands placed on the role of the superintendent by the assertions made in this report were the most challenging thus far. These demands elevated the complexity of the superintendent's role. It would take a savvy leader to rise to the occasion and meet the public's expectations.

The 21st Century Superintendent

Today, the role of the superintendent may be operating in its most complex form. Superintendents are accountable for managing a plethora of school district functions ranging from those associated with student transportation to student assessment. The school district functions for which a superintendent is responsible include the following: governance operations; curriculum and instructional services; instructional support services; human resource

services; finance/budget operations; administrative/business operations; facilities planning and plant services; accountability, information management, and technology services; external and internal communications; and safety and security services (Olivarez, 2008). In addition to these district functions, superintendents must act as lobbyists in order to gain the necessary political support for changes to the educational system (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2001). To add yet another layer, superintendents must be effective in managing their boards during a time when board members are not hesitant to terminate a superintendent's contract or give a less-than-favorable evaluation (Reeves, 2002). Board member expectations have increased alongside the demands for improved student academic achievement, making building and navigating positive board member relationships one of the key skillsets required of 21st century superintendents. Prioritizing the time to build those positive relationships with board members adds to the already complex role of the 21st century superintendent.

In order to move the strategic vision forward in a school district, urban school superintendents today must have influence in the communities, among business leaders, labor unions, politicians, board members, and school leaders. Lessons from the past help future and current leaders devise effective strategies when navigating through the complex political landscape of today's school districts:

> There was a time when successful superintendents were good at the "killer B's" – buildings, buses, books, budgets, and bonds. Today, superintendents have to be good at running all those things and more. They must be masters of the C's – communication, collaboration, community building, child advocacy and curricular solutions. They have had to move from a command-and-control mind-set toward the role of collaborator and

catalyst. The role is no longer about power; it is about persuasion. (Houston, 2008, p. 11)

A superintendent's perceived level of effectiveness is determined by how well they manage the various aspects of their role, but because of the expectation levels and pressures from accountability, the number of individuals seeking out this very public position has declined drastically (Reeves, 2002). The position of power is simply not as attractive as it once was and there is no longer any sense of longevity associated with it because school boards are often quick to terminate or buy-out the remainder of a superintendent's contract if they feel the district's varying needs are no longer being met. One need that must be met is that of student academic achievement. Closing the achievement gap and improving academic outcomes for all students are non-negotiables for anyone serving in the superintendent's seat. This responsibility reinforces the necessity of the instructional leadership component of the superintendent's role.

The Principal and Instructional Leadership

Prior to the 1980s, the concept of instructional leadership had been met with uncertainty and a lack of specificity concerning how instructional leadership directly impacted student achievement. Until more recent years, the concept of instructional leadership itself had been vague because the day-to-day practices of an instructional leader had yet to be identified and defined. In a journal article on teacher's perceptions of principals' instructional leadership, Al-Mahdy and Al-kiyumi (2015) wrote the following:

> As a consequence of the awareness that instructional leadership was not conceptualized properly, and of the lack of evidence concerning its influence on student learning, researchers started developing various models and corresponding questionnaires that later brought about substantial scholarly attention and investment in the field of instructional

leadership. (p. 1505)

The models of instructional leadership practices Al-Mahdy and Al-kiyumi (2015) refer to were created as a result of the effective schools research conducted in the 1980s (Hallinger, 2003). During the 1980s, the role of the superintendent had very little to do with instruction (Kowalski, 2005). As a result, the first research on instructional leadership focused solely on the practices of the school principal. Since then, the study of instructional leadership has evolved into a complex web of specific leadership practices, although these practices continue to be studied primarily through the lens of the school principal. Furthermore, studies in regards to instructional leadership beliefs and knowledge of superintendents are close to non-existent.

In 1985, Hallinger and Murphy developed one of the first models of instructional leadership. This model included three dimensions: defining the school's mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting a positive school-learning climate (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). Within the three dimensions, ten functions of instructional leadership were identified. Each function is noted in the Table 1 below along with the corresponding dimension (see Table 1).

Table 1: Hallinger and Murphy's Model of Instructional Leadership

Defining the school's mission	*Framing the school's goals*	*Communicating the school's goals*			
Managing the instructional program	*Supervising and evaluating instruction*	*Coordinating the curriculum*	*Monitoring student progress*		
Promoting a positive school learning climate	*Protecting instructional time*	*Promoting professional development*	*Maintaining high visibility*	*Providing incentives for teachers*	*Providing incentives for learning*

Although the model falls short of defining instructional leadership functions beyond the role of the school principal, many of the ten functions described by Hallinger and Murphy (1985) can also be attributed to the superintendent's role as an instructional leader. For example, within the accountability function of a school district, superintendents are responsible for monitoring student progress (Waters & Marzano, 2006). Another example would be in the human resources function of a school district. Superintendents are responsible for implementing innovative strategies to attract and retain the most effective teachers. To meet this goal, superintendents in some school districts, such as some in California, provide teachers with incentives in the form of

bonuses for working in high needs schools or content areas (Strunk & Zeehandelaar, 2011). In school districts, like some in New York City, superintendents meet this goal by awarding incentive pay to teachers who demonstrate their effectiveness through increasing student performance (Goodman & Turner, 2013). Superintendents also oversee professional development, another aspect of the human resources function of a school district (Olivarez, 2008). Hallinger and Murphy's (1985) model of instructional leadership also describes areas unaligned to the work of a superintendent such as framing the school's goals, communicating the school's goals and supervising and evaluating instruction. While these areas may not represent practices superintendents engage in directly as a part of their role, superintendents are still in a position to use their authority and persuasiveness to ensure school principals are aligning their work at the school level with the overall goals of the school district. This same notion regarding the superintendent's ability to act as an instructional leader through various indirect means is applicable when considering the work of Smith and Andrews (1989).

In their book on principal instructional leadership, Smith and Andrews (1989) discussed specific leadership competencies and the need for teachers to perceive their principals as the instructional leader of the school. In describing what they believe to be the practices of principals who exhibit strong instructional leadership skills, the authors wrote the following**:**

> The principal who displays strong instructional leadership: Places priority on curriculum and instruction issues, is dedicated to the goals of the school and the school district, is able to rally and mobilize resources to accomplish the goals of the district and the school, creates a climate of high expectations in the school, characterized by a tone of respect for teachers, students, parents, and community, functions as a leader with direct involvement

> in instructional policy, continually monitors student progress toward school achievement and teacher effectiveness in meeting those goals, demonstrates commitment to academic goals, demonstrates the ability to develop and articulate a clear vision of long-term goals for the school and to strong achievement goals that are consistent with district goals and priorities, effectively consults with others by involving the faculty and other groups in school decision processes, effectively and efficiently mobilizes resources such as materials, time, and support to enable the school and its personnel to most effectively meet academic goals and recognizes time as a scarce resource and creates order and discipline by minimizing factors that may disrupt the learning process. (Smith & Andrews, 1989, p.15)

Like the work of Hallinger and Murphy (1985), Smith and Andrews (1989) failed to identify or discuss the instructional leadership practices of superintendents, however, each of the practices identified in Smith and Andrews' (1989) book can potentially be attributed to the superintendent as an instructional leader. The work of both sets of scholars parallel one another in the areas of leader visibility in the school, goal setting, curriculum management, and monitoring student progress. Both models had the potential to help scholars by providing a starting point in identifying and defining the instructional leadership practices of superintendents. This initial research is built upon in subsequent models of the instructional leadership practices of school principals.

Murphy (1990) describes an instructional leadership model including four dimensions: developing mission and goals, managing the educational production function, promoting academic learning climate, and developing a supportive work environment of instructional

leadership. Like the work of Hallinger and Murphy (1985), each of the dimensions included in J. Murphy's model were later deconstructed further into 16 instructional leadership practices, which are included in Table 2**.**

Table 2: J. Murphy's Model of Instructional Leadership

Developing Mission and Goals	*Framing school goals and communicating school goals*
Managing the educational production function	*Promoting quality instruction, supervising and evaluating instruction, allocating and protecting instructional time, coordinating the curriculum, monitoring student progress*
Promoting an academic learning climate	*Establishing positive expectations and standards, maintaining high visibility, providing incentives for teachers and students, promoting professional development*
Developing a supportive work environment	*Creating a safe and orderly learning environment, providing opportunities for meaningful student involvement developing staff collaboration and cohesion securing outside resources in support of school goals, forging a link between the home and the school*

As shown in the chart above, Murphy (1990) reiterated many of the same findings discussed in the initial models of instructional leadership created by Hallinger and Murphy (1985) and Smith and Andrews (1989). For example, each model addresses framing and communicating school goals, supervising and evaluating instruction, visibility of the leader, professional development, the curriculum and monitoring student progress. These trends would reappear consistently in research conducted between the late 1990s and the early 2000s.

What makes Murphy's research stand out is that it does add to the literature on principal's instructional leadership practices in one area that had not previously been included: the practices outlined in the area of developing a supportive work environment. The practices identified around creating a positive school culture and climate that encourages a supportive work environment between teachers and among students are critical aspects of highly effective schools (Bell & Cordingley, 2014; Sammons, 1995). One could extrapolate that if a supportive work environment is critical to the success of a school, then it is also necessary to have a supportive work environment amongst the staff members in a school district. If principals are responsible for creating that positive space at the school level, then superintendents would be responsible for creating the same at the district level. This responsibility adds to the list of what the instructional leadership practices of a superintendent might look like based on what can be ascertained from the research on principal's instructional leadership practices.

The component of instructional leadership focusing on culture and climate would continue to surface in later studies on principal's instructional leadership practices. For example, in the book *Leading the Instructional Program,* Weber (1996) identified five essential domains of instructional leadership: defining the mission, managing curriculum and instruction, observing

and improving instruction, assessing the instructional program and promoting a positive learning climate. Principals who promoted a positive school culture were said to be aware of the effect teacher expectations have on student achievement. They developed a positive school culture by recognizing and rewarding individuals who met expectations for student performance, protected time for learning, and implemented strategies for improving the climate of learning in the school. After 10 years of research, the notion of culture and climate had been cemented as an integral part of instructional leadership. The sense that instructional leadership consisted of a wide range of practices, each uniquely impacting instruction and student achievement, had also become apparent in the literature. The work that had been done thus far around principal's instructional leadership had become of great assistance to scholars taking on the task of identifying and defining the instructional leadership practices of superintendents. A tangible definition of instructional leadership had yet been discussed in the literature, but one that could fit with any of the aforementioned models of instructional leadership would soon appear.

The manner in which King (2002) defined instructional leadership made room for the concept of instructional leadership to be applied to both principals and superintendents alike. According to King (2002), instructional leadership can be defined as being "anything that leaders do to improve teaching and learning in their schools and districts" (p. 62). Although very broad in its definition, King went on to describe in detail a list of specific practices exhibited by instructional leaders. These practices included focusing on teaching and learning, developing the leadership capacity of others, leading learning, using data to inform decision-making, creating the conditions for professional learning communities, and using resources creatively (King, 2002). Based on the practices identified in King (2002) and the definition given to instructional

leadership, the role of a superintendent as an instructional leader in the district is not only fathomable, but the instructional leadership practices amongst principals and superintendents can look very similar. This is evident in the findings of research on superintendents as instructional leaders (Herman, 1990; Morgan & Peterson, 2002; Waters & Marzano, 2006; Watts, 1992).

In summary, each of the instructional leadership models had a common thread of effective school leader and potential district leader practices. These included defining the school's mission and vision, a focus on school climate, managing curriculum and instruction, and utilizing data. In an article on the principal as a learner, Dufour (2002) wrote, "Educators are gradually redefining the role of the principal from instructional leader with a focus on teaching to being the leader of a professional community with a focus on learning" (p. 4). This confirms the notion that educators and scholars have not yet finished molding their conceptualizations of instructional leadership at the principal level. Although the ideas described in the literature above are concepts that will continue to evolve when considering instructional leadership practices at both the school and district levels of leadership, beliefs and knowledge are completely absent from the above studies and models of instructional leadership. The absence of both beliefs and knowledge from studies on principal's instructional leadership is also evident in studies about superintendent's instructional leadership.

The Superintendent and Instructional Leadership Beliefs

One notable observation in reviewing the literature on superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs is the way in which beliefs and values are used interchangeably throughout the studies (Deal & Peterson, 1999), although the two concepts are not the same. In an article discussion of the instructional leadership values and beliefs of school leaders, Bussey (2006)

defined values as "conceptions of the desirable that motivate behavior" and beliefs as "those things that an individual accepts as true" (p. 2). One's beliefs and values are aligned and influence one another (Bussey, 2006; Hodgkinson, 1978; Kasten & Ashbaugh, 1991; Sarros & Santora, 2001). Another notable observation was the lack of existing literature focusing on superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs. There were, however, three studies focusing strictly on superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs. Each study is discussed below.

Griffin and Chance (1994) examined principal and superintendent's perceptions of superintendent's behaviors and activities in effective school district, the interrelationships between the superintendent's behaviors and activities, and principals' perceptions of the superintendent's role in leading an effective school district. Sixteen principals were given questionnaires used to collect data while six superintendents participated in interviews as a means of data collection. Data triangulation occurred between the interviews and questionnaires alongside non-participant observations and document analysis. Six school districts were included in the study. One conclusion made based on the data collected during the study focused on the alignment of the behaviors and activities of superintendents to three major themes, one of which was the superintendent's beliefs.

Researchers found each superintendent included in the study believed in the ability of all students to learn and be academically successful. The six superintendents in the study had each developed a comprehensive teacher professional development plan as an activity aligned to this belief. The goal of the plan was to provide each teacher in the district with the necessary tools to positively impact student achievement in the classroom (Griffin & Chance, 1994). The underlying belief was if students received instruction from effective teachers, they would all be

able to learn and be academically successful. The behaviors and activities of the six superintendents in this study demonstrated the influence beliefs have on what superintendents do and the decisions they make in their role as the district's leader.

In a study measuring the instructional leadership values and beliefs of school leaders, Bussey (2006) identified three themes specifically related to the beliefs of educational leaders. They were as follows: the work is a spiritual calling; all kids can learn; and schools have the capacity to help kids learn. Educational leaders in the study referred to their work in education as having a "broader purpose for their lives on earth" (p.4). They explained the work was about "more than just getting a paycheck" (p. 4). They recognized that having a certain level of passion for the work and the belief that it is purpose-driven does not replace the need to be an effective leader but rather enhances leadership effectiveness once the necessary instructional leadership knowledge is in place. The belief in the ability of all kids to learn was coupled with the belief in school's capacity to help kids learn. Like the findings in Griffin and Chance (1994), Bussey (2006) concluded with themes related to each educational leader's belief in all students' ability to learn, however, the latter went as far as to place the responsibility for student's learning on schools. Effective leaders in the Bussey (2006) study suggested, "Leaders must believe schools are responsible and effective in impacting kid's learning," and one participant explained, "Leaders can no longer make excuses for schools"(p. 5).

In a qualitative case study, Fairbanks-Shultz (2010) examined the beliefs and leadership practices of a superintendent who successfully increased student academic achievement outcomes for subgroups of students who traditionally underperform their peers, such as special education students and students from impoverished backgrounds. One of the primary goals of

this study was to describe the ways in which a superintendent's core beliefs influence their practices around increasing student achievement. The results of the study revealed four superintendent beliefs were the diving force behind their practices and decisions regarding student academic achievement. Those four beliefs were as follows: a belief in being the best, the belief that all students can learn, the belief of holding true to one's own personal values, and the belief in the safety of students and staff (Fairbanks-Shultz, 2010). In the analysis of the data, Shultz concluded the following:

> I further offer that the leadership practices were a manifestation of the beliefs of the superintendent as supported by interviews with the same stakeholders. I suggest that the increase in academic achievement of the traditionally marginalized students were supported by the leadership practices of the superintendent, which, in turn occurred because of his beliefs. (p. 131)

Common themes surfaced out of each of the above studies as they relate to the beliefs of superintendents. One of those common themes was the belief that all students can learn. Additionally, the discussion and analysis by the researchers of the studies suggests a connectedness between the superintendent's beliefs and practices. The interrelatedness between the two aspects of superintendent's instructional leadership is powerful because it provides a basis for continuing to study not only "what" superintendents do and "how," but also the "why," the driving force behind the "what" and the "how." With only three studies in the literature giving explicit attention to the superintendent's beliefs, the current body of research is limited at best indicating the need to further explore the topic.

The Superintendent and Instructional Leadership Knowledge

In Nonaka and Takechui (1995), the authors defined knowledge as a "dynamic human process of justifying personal belief toward the truth" (p. 58). This definition of knowledge implies it is functional and deeply rooted in one's experiences and beliefs. During this process, new knowledge is continuously created, induced, and deducted (Kumaraswamy & Chitale, 2012; Mosconi & Roy, 2013). In the 21st century educational context, superintendents can be seen engaging in learning opportunities alongside principals through their participation in instructional rounds, professional development, and collaborative planning sessions. According to Herman (1999), superintendents recognize the need to have broad knowledge on many topics as a way of connecting to the work happening in schools and guide the school board in creating the goals and policies for the district.

Some suggest having a broad knowledge in instruction is no longer enough in the midst of increased accountability for student achievement outcomes and the public's cry for higher performing schools (e.g., Eadie, 2003). They argue superintendents must hold specific knowledge in many areas of educational leadership including instruction, finances, facilities, and politics. As it relates to instruction, today's superintendents must have specific knowledge in the areas of student assessment data, research on teaching and learning, curriculum, and best instructional practices to improve student academic achievement outcomes (Elmore, 2000; Johnson, 2002). Without this specific knowledge, authors suggest superintendents will experience difficulties in making sound decisions for the school district and in being viewed as a credible and confident leader.

Similar to the research on the superintendent's beliefs, the topic of superintendent's

knowledge has not been studied at great lengths and is not represented in the literature on superintendents. In one of the few studies represented in the research, an explanation for the gap in the literature stems from Stein and Nelson's (2003) suggestion that the higher an individual ascends in the field of educational, the less refined they become in their specific knowledge of instruction. In a cross-case study analysis of three different districts, the authors concluded superintendents who are instructional leaders have specific knowledge in two very broad categories: knowledge of what the work is about and knowledge of how to facilitate the learning. The first area, knowledge of what the work is about, is broken down to having knowledge about a specific subject matter, how students learn the subject and the best ways of teaching the subject. Shulman (1986) refers to this type of knowledge as pedagogical knowledge. The second category, knowledge of how to facilitate learning, includes "understanding the learning needs of individuals; arranging the interactive social environments that embody the right mix of expertise and appropriate tasks to spur learning; putting the right mix of incentives and sanctions into the environment to motivate individuals to learn; and ensuring that there are adequate resources available to support the learning" (Stein & Nelson, 2003, p.426). Several aspects of the "how to" knowledge, such as ensuring there are adequate resources available, overlap the research on superintendent's practices, which will be discussed in the next section.

The Superintendent and Instructional Leadership Practices

Bredeson and Kose (2007) found out of 10 task functions studied and the amount of time spent on each, instructional leadership was fourth on the list of importance for both superintendents included in the 2003 data set as well as those in the 1994 data set. Wagner (2010), author of *The Savvy Superintendent*, shares that while the current vision of the

superintendent's role does not dismiss functions such as budget management and personnel, superintendents agree that the instructional leadership aspect of their position must be prominent in their everyday work. In her book she wrote, "There is nothing more important to the role of school and district leaders than to positively impact instruction and student achievement. That's one of the conclusions drawn from interviews I did with over 50 superintendents" (Wagner, 2010). More recent research has helped to further identify and define what the superintendent's instructional leadership actually looks like in practice rather than theory alone; however, there remains a void in the research when studying the instructional leadership practices of superintendents. Murphy and Hallinger (1986) wrote, "research on the superintendency is remarkably thin, while research on the instructional leadership role of superintendents is sparser still" (p. 214). The remainder of this section summarizes the current research on the instructional leadership practices of superintendents.

A year after developing a model of principal's instructional leadership practices, Murphy and Hallinger (1986) sought to learn more about the role of a superintendent as an instructional leader. In a study of 12 effective school districts in California, Murphy and Hallinger (1986) identified six practices of instructional leadership exhibited by each superintendent. The six practices of superintendent's instructional leadership were as follows: setting goals focused on instruction, hiring principals, supervising and evaluating principals, establishing an instructional and curricular focus, ensuring consistency in technical core operations, and monitoring curriculum and instruction (Murphy & Hallinger, 1986). In these school districts, instruction was a priority and superintendents felt the need to be highly active in curricular decision-making. These leaders saw themselves as the key person responsible for maintaining internal uniformity

with curriculum and instruction. In the districts studied, superintendents made regular school visits in order to spend time developing the school principal as an instructional leader (Murphy & Hallinger, 1986). In prior studies on the instructional leadership practices of principals (e.g., King, 2002; Murphy, 1990; Weber, 1996), researchers depict the principal as taking on the role of the teacher's teacher. In this study, that view is enlarged to see the superintendent as the principal's teacher. Many of Murphy and Hallinger's initial findings would be replicated in later studies (e.g., Herman, 1990; Morgan & Peterson, 2000; Watts, 1992).

Herman (1990) sought to examine the practices of 48 Texas superintendents with reputations for being effective instructional leaders. Of the practices included in the findings, five could be linked to instructional leadership. These instructional leadership practices included the following: allocating instructional personnel, organizing the instructional process, supporting the instructional program, developing instructional personnel, and planning the instructional program. Many of these practices, such as supporting the instructional program, developing instructional personnel and organizing the instructional process tied very closely to the findings in Murphy and Hallinger's (1986) study. This is also evident in the findings of Watts (1992). In his dissertation, Watts (1992) examined the instructional leadership practices of superintendents. As a result of his study, Watts (1992) identified 12 instructional leadership practices of superintendents. These included the following: collaboratively developing goals, evaluating instructional effectiveness, facilitating instruction through budget, planning for instruction, supervising instruction, monitoring instructional programs, developing principals as instructional leaders, developing instructional policies, reviewing research, selecting personnel, facilitating staff development, and communicating district expectations.

A newly identified concept in the findings of both Herman and Watts' studies was the practice of allocating personnel to facilitate instruction. Watts (1992) referred to it a little differently when he suggested superintendents facilitate instruction through how they manage and oversee the budget. In both instances, the findings showed that one of the instructional leadership practices of superintendents is to effectively utilize the district's resources (i.e., personnel and money) to advance instruction. Just as resource management is an indirect means of facilitating instruction and advancing student achievement, the same can be said for the practice developing instructional policies (Watts, 1992). These practices may be less observable by teachers and principals working in a school building, but they have an equal amount of influence over a school district's growth in student academic achievement outcomes as the more hands-on instructional leadership practices of a superintendent. Later studies would further highlight a superintendent's ability to impact student achievement, both directly and indirectly, by engaging in a variety of instructional leadership practices**.**

The instructional leadership practices of five superintendents were analyzed in a mixed methods study conducted by Morgan and Peterson (2002). Superintendents were selected based on their reputation as effective instructional leaders. The perceptions of the principals and school board members were examined, as related to the superintendent's instructional leadership, using four of the 12 areas of Watt's superintendent instructional leadership survey instrument. These areas were as follows: (1) providing vision for instruction by planning for instruction and collaboratively developing goals, (2) evaluating and monitoring instruction, (3) promoting instruction by developing instructional leaders, and (4) communicating instructional expectations to staff and community (Morgan & Peterson, 2000, p. 175). The results revealed three

statistically significant findings. In comparison to a random group of superintendents, superintendents perceived to be effective instructional leaders were perceived by principals and school board members as being more involved in providing the vision for instruction by planning for instruction and collaboratively developing goals for the district, evaluating and monitoring instructional programs, and communicating expectations to staff and community (Davidson, 2005). Each of the practices described in the findings of the study provided more examples of how superintendents can impact instruction and student achievement through a less hands-on approach. This is important particularly for urban superintendents who may find it difficult to coach and support principals through regular school visits. Superintendents working in any context need to be knowledgeable about the variety of impactful practices they can employ as the instructional leaders in their districts.

The evolutionary perspective of superintendents and studies focused on superintendent's instructional leadership reveal gaps in several areas that are significant to the body of research seeking to further understand the superintendent as an instructional leader. One glaring example of this gap is around superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs and practices. Another gap in this area of research exists around principal's perceptions of superintendent's instructional leadership practices and how those practices impact student achievement outcomes and influence their own instructional leadership. These gaps highlight the need for this study, which will add a distinctive lens to the research by examining principal's perceptions of superintendent's instructional leadership with individualized, as-needed probes, rather than studying the perceptions of superintendents themselves. To examine principal's perceptions I will utilize the

work of Waters and Marzano (2006) as the conceptual framework, which is described in the section below before presenting a new conceptual model in Chapter 5.

Conceptual Framework

In a working paper for the book School District Leadership that Works: The Effect of Superintendent Leadership on Student Achievement, Waters and Marzano (2006) detail the results of a meta-analysis examining "over 27 quantitative studies conducted since 1970 on the influence of school district leaders on student achievement" (p. 3). The study, involving more than 2,800 school districts, posed the following research questions for the meta-analysis of research on superintendents:

1. What is the strength of relationship between leadership at the district level and average student academic achievement in the district?
2. What specific district-level leadership responsibilities are related to student academic achievement?
3. What specific leadership practices are used to fulfill these responsibilities?
4. What is the variation in the relationship between district leadership and student achievement? Stated differently, do practices associated with strong leadership always have a positive effect on student achievement? (p.7)

The study resulted in three findings: (1) there is a statistically significant correlation between district leadership and student achievement, (2) there are five responsibilities of the district leader with a statistically significant positive correlation to average student academic achievement, and (3) superintendent tenure is positively correlated to student achievement (Waters & Marzano, 2006). Each of the five district leader responsibilities found to impact

student achievement relate directly to a superintendent's instructional leadership practices. Those responsibilities include the following: collaborative goal-setting, non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction, board alignment and support of district goals, monitoring goals for achievement and instruction, and use of resources to support achievement and instruction goals. Each responsibility is described below:

1. Collaborative goal setting: Superintendent's include all stakeholders in setting goals for the district.
2. Non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction: Effective superintendents ensure everyone is working towards achieving the goals set for schools and individual student achievement.
3. Board alignment and support of district goals: Board members are aligned with the instructional and student achievement goals of the district. Nothing gets approved that negatively impacts the district's focus on instruction and student achievement.
4. Monitoring goals for achievement and instruction: Effective superintendents continually monitor progress toward district instructional and student achievement goals.
5. Use of resources to support achievement and instruction goals: All resources are aligned to meet the goal of student achievement.

Each of these instructional leadership practices impact student achievement. What is intriguing about each of these practices is that they also broadly represent the similar instructional leadership practices described in the literature on effective principals. For example, the use of resources to support instruction, the monitoring of student progress and school goal setting are

each instructional leadership practices of principals described in the literature (e.g., Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Murphy, 1990; Weber, 1996). For this study, the work of Waters and Marzano (2006), and the superintendent responsibilities described therein, served as the conceptual framework for the study.

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of how the superintendent's role has evolved over time and the impact of *A Nation at Risk* on the current iteration of the role. The chapter also highlighted the research that has been done in the area of instructional leadership as it relates to the various models of instructional leadership conceived over time and the findings on studies examining the instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices of superintendents. The lack of research on the instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices of superintendents as perceived by effective principals was highlighted and a conceptual framework was shared highlighting the work of Waters and Marzano (2006), who studied the leadership practices of superintendents that have an impact on student academic achievement outcomes.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This qualitative study utilizes rich, thick descriptions to describe effective principal's (as defined in chapter one) perceptions of the instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices of superintendents in urban school districts. This chapter outlines the methodological approaches applied in this study. Findings from this research provide greater clarity to superintendents and school boards members alike around the role of the superintendent as an instructional leader and the specific beliefs, knowledge, and practices that lead to an increase in student academic achievement outcomes and influence principal's instructional leadership. Findings from this research add to the body of literature on the superintendent as an instructional leader, which can be studied in educational administration programs aimed specifically at developing aspiring superintendents.

For effective principals in a large, urban school district in Texas, this study answers the following research questions:

How do effective principals in a large, urban school district in Texas,

1. describe instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices of superintendents?
2. perceive the impact of their superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices on student achievement?
3. describe how superintendent's beliefs, knowledge, and practices as an instructional leader influence their own beliefs, knowledge, and practices as it relates to instructional leadership?
4. make sense of the instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices of their superintendent?

Research Design

This study applied the epistemological stance of constructivism. In his explanation of how individuals understand an experience, Maxwell (2013) describes epistemological constructivism as "inevitably our construction, rather than a purely objective perception of reality, and no such construction can claim absolute truth" (p. 43). In a dissertation on superintendent's instructional leadership, Fairbanks-Shultz (2010) asserts the notion that constructivists recognize a person's understanding of an event or phenomena is rooted in the individual's perceptions, social experiences, and social norms. This understanding is not determined by external theory of reality. The use of constructivism is important to this study because principals' perceptions of their superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices, the impact they have on student achievement, and the influence they have on principal's instructional leadership is grounded in their own understanding of and experiences with instructional leadership. Principals' instructional leadership ideas and practices are informed by what they have learned about instructional leadership through these experiences and formal education, and how they connect this knowledge to their observations of and interactions with their superintendent. Constructivism allows the participants to connect their perceptions of superintendents and their influence (their lived experience) to the student outcomes (the external theory of reality). This study seeks to understand how effective principals make sense of the superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices, how they impact student academic achievement outcomes and how they influence principal's instructional leadership.

As a qualitative study, I was able to gather information in a manner allowing me as the researcher to develop a rich understanding of those superintendent instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices effective principals perceive to have an impact of student academic achievement outcomes, how they influence principal's instructional leadership and how they make sense of superintendent's instructional leadership. The qualitative research design allowed me to explore the meaning the participants ascribed to the questions regarding their superintendent's instructional leadership. The qualitative research design is defined by Denzin and Lincoln (2011), who states,

> Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. (p. 3)

Interviewed in their natural setting, their world, the school context, I asked relevant questions of the participant principals. I was able to recognize themes by the language, the vernacular of instructional leadership used by participants. I was able to enter deeply into the participants' experiences and get their perspective (Creswell, 2013). Patton (1990) states the purpose of interviews is,

> To find out what is in and on someone else's mind. The purpose of open-ended interviewing is not to put things in someone's mind but to access the perspective of the person being interviewed. We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe. (p. 279)

This design is important to this particular study, given principal's perceptions of superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices have not been explored at length in the current literature. The research that has been conducted focuses (e.g., Herman, 1990) on the superintendent as the participant, yielding self-reported perceptions of the phenomena being studied. This study steered away from this aspect of the data collection process; instead, focusing on the principals as the participants who have experienced the same phenomena.

Participant Selection

Six effective principals in the large, urban school district at the focus of the study were the participants of this study: two high school principals, two middle school principals and two elementary school principals. Participants selected for the study met the minimum criteria established for inclusion, which were: (1) an individual who has been a principal for a minimum of seven years, irrespective of the school district, and (2) a principal leading a school with an exemplary track record of high student performance as evidenced by local, state, and national awards received, distinctions earned in the state's student's exemplary performance on state tests over a period of time and state accountability distinctions received. Determining specific criteria for participant selection allowed me to hone in on the perceptions of those principals best positioned to discuss instructional leadership based on their own success as an instructional leader. Once the individuals who met the criteria were identified, a purposeful sampling method was employed (Creswell, 2013). Purposeful sampling allows researchers to select individuals for the study after specific criteria have been set based on the research questions.

Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

After receiving approval on the research design by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Texas at Austin, individual, semi-structured interviews were used to collect data for the study. The purpose of interviewing, according to Patton (1990) is to learn about what is in and on the minds of the participants. Interviews were chosen as the primary mode of data collection for this study because they provided me with an opportunity to discuss the phenomena with the participants directly, allowing me to gain an understanding into the participant's lived experiences with the phenomena being studied.

All interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed using a transcription service. During the interviews, I took notes in order to capture any descriptions of non-verbal communication. The interview protocols were developed in alignment with the research questions and conceptual framework for this study. The names of the school districts, schools, and principals were changed in order to maintain the confidentiality of the participants in the study.

Researcher Role

In qualitative research, it is critical for the researcher to be aware of his or her own biases and experiences as related to the topic being studied and "bracket out" or separate those biases and experiences from that of the participants (Creswell, 2013, p. 81). For this study, it is important to acknowledge that for several years, I served as a principal in a large, urban school district. I currently serve in a supervisory role in a large, urban school district in Texas; whereas, my primary job responsibility is to coach school principals around the development practices that will aid them in becoming more effective instructional leaders of their schools. I have a personal investment in this study as I aspire to one day be a superintendent. I recognize the findings of

this study may be helpful to me as I work towards this goal. My current and prior roles in large, urban school districts will better assist me in understanding the context of the study and the potential findings highlighted as a result of this study. I understand the need to be aware of my personal biases and the importance of reflection throughout the data collection and analysis process.

Data Analysis Procedures

Maxwell (2008) says, "The goal of coding is not to produce counts of things but to fracture the data and rearrange it into categories that facilitate comparison between things in the same category and between categories" (p. 237). With this in mind, at the conclusion of the interviews, a transcription service named TranscribeMe was used to create transcripts of each interview. After all transcriptions were received, I used a software program named Dedoose to load the transcripts and begin the process of coding. Three categories were used to code and analyze the excerpts: organizational, substantive, and theoretical categories. Maxwell (2008) described each of the categories as follows:

> Organizational categories are generally broad subjects or issues that you establish prior to your interviews or observations, or that could usually have been anticipated…substantive categories are primarily descriptive, in a broad sense that include description of participants' concepts and beliefs; they stay close to the data categorized and don't inherently imply a more abstract theory…theoretical categories, in contrast, place the coded data into a more general or abstract framework. These categories may be derived either from prior theory or from an inductively developed theory (in which case the concepts and the theory are usually developed concurrently). They usually represent the

researcher's concepts (what are called "etic" categories), rather than denoting participants' own concepts. (p. 237)

To begin, I used the organizational coding process. Information derived from the review of literature was used to complete the initial coding related to superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs and knowledge. The use of codes aligned with the themes related to the study conducted by Waters and Marzano (2006) were used initially to analyze data related to superintendent's practices. These codes are listed below:

- Collaborative goal-setting
- Non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction
- Board alignment and support of district goals
- Monitoring goals for achievement and instruction
- Use of resources to support achievement and instruction goals

Starting here in the process made sense because these codes are closely related to the study's main goal, to describe how effective principals' perceptions of the superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices, how they impact student achievement outcomes, and how they influence principal's instructional leadership.

Short excerpts taken directly from the transcripts of the participant's words or phrases were used to develop the substantive codes and further define the initial set of codes within the context of this specific study and the participants' responses. The last round of coding included the use of theoretical coding as I began to analyze the data and develop themes based on my understanding of the concepts being presented in the data (Maxwell, 2008). Organizational codes were initially developed based on the framework developed as a result of the findings in the

study by Waters and Marzano (2006). Codes developed based on participants' responses to the questions regarding their superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices, and were used in the second round of substantive coding. The last round of coding included themes I developed as a result of my understanding of how the participants' make sense of superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices and their impact on student academic achievement outcomes. As a result of the data analysis and procedures, I developed a new conceptual framework representing the themes in the data as related to effective principal's perceptions of superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices.

Delimitations

In designing a research study, delimitations are the choices made by the researcher that should be emphasized in describing the research design (Creswell, 2013). This is important as it supports the reader in fully understanding the context in which the study was conducted. In this study, there are two delimitations of which the reader should be aware: 1) participants were limited to one urban, public school district in Texas, and 2) interviews were only conducted with participants who currently serve as school principals and meet the aforementioned criteria.

Limitations

Limitations are the factors or conditions that have the potential to influence the results of the study (Creswell, 2013). There are several limitations of this study, one of which is the small sample size, as it only represents a small group of principals in one urban school district in Texas. This limits the transferability of the findings of the study. While including perceptions of effective principals in other school districts would have provided additional insight into the

phenomena being studied, the time and resources required to do so were not available at this time. Another limitation of this study is principals in the study may have felt uncomfortable with discussing their perceptions of the superintendent, particularly if any of their perceptions could be perceived as being negative or unflattering. The superintendent is ultimately the principal's supervisor and, in the urban school district included in the proposed study, the current superintendent is relatively new to the position. This means principals are still seeking to build a positive relationship with the superintendent and vice versa. Principals may have been hesitant to divulge any information that could potentially threaten that relationship, which may, to some extent, affect the trustworthiness of the data. I helped participants feel more comfortable by ensuring their confidentiality throughout the study and after the study has concluded.

Trustworthiness

The strength of any qualitative research study is grounded in the trustworthiness of the data and interpretations. In order to protect the trustworthiness of a qualitative study, researchers often use a method called bracketing. Bracketing is when the researcher employs strategies to minimize the effect of potentially harmful preconceptions on the research process (Tufford & Newman, 2012). During the data collection process of this study memoing was utilized as a strategy to separate my reactions and experiences with the phenomena from those of the participants. Data collected during the interviews was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Additionally, I utilized "rich, thick descriptions to convey the findings" (Maxwell, 2008, p. 196). Rich, thick descriptions provide an in-depth account of the participant's experiences and aide me in making meaning of those descriptions within the context of the phenomena being studied (Holloway, 1997). I was able to utilize rich, thick descriptions in the findings by incorporating

participant's direct quotes from the interviews. Finally, I utilized the member checking strategy as another method in ensuring trustworthiness of the data. Member checking is a technique whereas the researcher "determines the accuracy of the qualitative findings through taking the final report or specific descriptions or themes back to participants and determining whether the participants feel they are accurate" (Maxwell, 2008, p. 196). In this study, member checking involved sharing the findings of the study with the participants via email which gave them the opportunity to provide feedback on the study's major themes and descriptions. This process added credibility to the study by ensuring accurate interpretations of the data were made.

Summary

In this chapter, the methodological approach and specific information as it relates to the methods this study utilized were provided. The criteria for participants, sampling strategies, data collection methods and notes concerning limitations and delimitations were also described. The results of the study are presented in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Results

This study examined effective principals' perceptions of superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices in a large, urban school district. In this chapter, descriptions of the six effective principals included in the study are provided in the first section, followed by an analysis of the participant's descriptions of instructional leadership. The next section describes the effective principal's perceptions of superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices followed by a discussion of the participant's perceptions of the impact of superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices on student academic achievement outcomes. The fifth section describes effective principal's perceptions of the influence of the superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices on their own beliefs, knowledge, and practices as an instructional leader at the school level. The final section discusses how the effective principals in this study make sense of the superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices as it relates to their ability to be successful in a large, urban school district. All sections include data from interviews conducted during the study to help answer each of the study's research questions. Each section includes subtopics that align to the themes represented in the interview data. It should be noted that the names of the participants, their schools and the school district have been changed to ensure each participant's confidentiality.

Introduction to the Effective Principals

This section of the chapter provides background information on each of the six participants in the study (see Table 3). The participants included two elementary school principals, two middle school principals, and two high school principals. The background

information provided includes the number of years each participant has served as a principal and the number of superintendents each participant has worked under as a principal in the school district. In addition to this background information, details are provided regarding the accomplishments and special recognitions each principal has received, information on the participant's prior and current schools are provided including the school type, grade levels served, student demographics and information about the school's state accountability data. This information will help the reader understand how each participant meets the criteria for being an effective principal and the context from which their lived experiences have been derived. The background questions in the first interview data allowed me to collect this data in connection with information retrieved from the Texas state accountability website and the information provided on the school district's website.

Table 3. Participants

Participant	School Type & Grades Served	Number of Years as a Principal	Number of Superintendents
Kate	Neighborhood school; PreK-5	10	6
Lisa	Neighborhood school; PreK-5	7	2
Kelly	Neighborhood school; 6-8	7	2
Sarah	Neighborhood school; 6-8	9	4
John	Comprehensive High School	30	5
Mary	Comprehensive High School	22	6

In describing the participant's accomplishments, data from Texas' current school accountability rating system is used to explain each school's student achievement outcomes. Only data from the last four school years was reviewed for the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) exam. Prior to this time period, Texas students were administrated different state exams including the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) and the Stanford achievement test, making it difficult to compare student growth and declines beyond the four-year time period. There are four indexes included in the Texas state accountability system: student achievement, student progress, closing the achievement gap, and post-secondary readiness. Index one, student achievement, measures the average number of students meeting the passing standard on all content area test combined.

Index two, student progress, measures the individual expected progress of each student according to the various student groups, such as race/ethnicity, special education and English Language Learners and generates a score that is independent of the school's overall achievement levels. Index three, closing performance gaps, measures the advanced academic achievement of the economically disadvantaged student group and the lowest performing race/ethnicity student groups on each campus. Index four, postsecondary readiness, measures the number of students scoring beyond grade level expectations. For high schools, index four also takes into account the school's four and five-year graduation rates, drop-out rate, the number of students completing career and technical education sequences and the number of students taking advanced placement and dual credit courses. In addition to receiving a rating for each of the four indexes, schools can also receive state distinctions in each of the categories for which the school qualifies. When being awarded a state distinction in any of the seven categories, schools are compared to their

comparison group of schools of like communities and student demographics. Schools that are outperforming schools in the comparison group are awarded state distinctions.

Participant 1. Kate has served as a principal for a total of 10 years across three school districts. She has worked under two superintendents in her current school district where she serves a neighborhood school that houses a fine arts magnet program. The school has over 650 students enrolled in grades PreK-5. Its demographics include a student population that is about 30% White, 30% Hispanic, 25% African American, 10% Asian and 5% other. Approximately 35% of Kate's students are economically disadvantaged, 40% have been identified as gifted and talented, 20% are at-risk and a little less than 10% are identified as LEP (Limited English Proficiency). Kate serves a population with a variety of needs, which can be difficult to manage, but under her leadership, the school has consistently made gains in index one, student achievement. Kate has led the school from performing in the high 80s prior to the start of her tenure to earning a 92% in student achievement based on the 2015-2016 state accountability data. In addition to accomplishing this difficult feat, under Kate's leadership the number of state distinctions has increased from one in 2013 and 2014, to six out of six possible state distinctions in 2016. Distinctions were earned in each of the following areas: academic achievement in Reading, Math, Science, post-secondary readiness, top 25% in student progress and top 25% in closing performance gaps.

Participant 2. Lisa has served as a principal in the district for seven years. She spent four years at a small school of approximately 350 students in a poor community on the east side of the city and three years of her current school where there are a little over 700 students in grades PreK-5. At Lisa's first school she served a majority Hispanic population where 55% of

the students were classified as bilingual, 96% economically disadvantaged and 10% were enrolled in special education programming. Approximately 90% of Lisa's students met the criteria for being at-risk and 62% were LEP. Under Lisa's leadership, the school met state standards for each of the four years she served as principal and the school's state accountability data consistently showed growth in each of the tested subjects. Specifically, Lisa led the school to a 12% increase in Reading, a 6% increase in Math and a 42% increase in Writing before she moved on to the next challenge, a school nearly twice the size in a more affluent, although still poor, side of town.

The demographics at Lisa's current school include a student population that is about 85% Hispanic, 10% Black, 5% Asian, 81% at-risk and 100% economically disadvantaged. Over 70% of Lisa's students are English Language Learners and more than 7% of Lisa's students represent the school's special education population. What makes Lisa's school one of the more unique elementary schools is that she serves the second largest refugee population in the district with more than 6% of the students originating from countries such as Nepal, Syria, Afghanistan, and Africa. With regard to student academic achievement outcomes, Lisa's school has consistently met state standards under her leadership with approximately 70% of Lisa's students meeting expectations on the state exam. Specifically, in the last four years, Lisa's school has shown a 6% increase in index 2, student progress, and an 11% increase in index 4, postsecondary readiness.

Participant 3. Kelly began her career as a principal of a neighborhood middle school in a low-income community where she has now served seven years. Prior to this position, Kelly was an Assistant Principal at a struggling high school and a classroom teacher. The middle school where Kelly currently serves has an enrollment of approximately 500 students; 58% are

Black and 41% are Hispanic. The student population is 19% special education, 20% English Language Learners, and 80% economically disadvantaged. The mobility rate at the school is 35%, one of the largest in the district. During her time as principal, Kelly has increased the school's performance on index 2 of the state accountability system by 7%, which measures each student's progress as compared to their expected growth measure. She has also made improvements in indexes 3 and 4 of the state accountability system. One of Kelly's most notable accomplishments as a school leader was leading her middle school from being rated "improvement required", to earning five out of seven possible state distinctions. Kelly attributes this accomplishment to "doing a few things consistently well and retaining highly effective teachers and leaders."

Participant 4. Sarah is currently the principal of a mid-sized middle school. The school serves a student demographic that is 36% Hispanic, 33% White, 10% Black and 16% Asian. Approximately 30% of the student population is economically disadvantaged. During her time as a middle school principal, Sarah has continuously focused on serving the needs of each individual student in her school. During her interview Sarah noted, "it was a high-performing campus at the same time, but I was able to increase the data. It's very difficult to move it tremendously." Although many school leaders may have boasted about being at about a 90% passing rate on the state exams in 2013, Sarah honed in on the students who were not passing. Her focus paid off. Sarah's school earned a 96% in student achievement on the state exam in 2014 year, a 3% increase from 2013. Sarah's school maintained this growth through the 2016 school year while also increasing postsecondary performance by 6%, closing the achievement

gap by 8%, and earning seven out of seven state distinctions for the last three years, including the 2016 school year.

Sarah's exceptional leadership did not begin at the middle school. Her journey began as a principal at a low-performing elementary school. During her interview, Sarah shared that a large part of her success at the elementary school was due to her decision to "create a campus leadership team and create a culture where there are other individuals making decisions on the campus." When she began her tenure as an elementary school principal, the campus was rated "acceptable." However, after her first year, the campus rating increased to "exemplary" status and remained at that level for the duration of her time as principal. When she began, only 32% of students were performing at grade level on the state exams in Reading and Math; however, after her 6th year as the principal, that number had risen to 72%. Sarah can also be credited with increasing the school's enrollment from approximately 340 students when she began, to 750 at the end of her tenure. Likewise, the number of students identified as gifted and talented increased from 5% to 18% over the course of her six-year tenure. Sarah has been awarded several distinctive awards throughout her career as a principal.

Participant 5. John currently leads a comprehensive high school. The student population is 30% Black, 37% Hispanic, 26% White, and 4% Asian. It has a 9% mobility rate, about 50% of his students are economically disadvantaged, 5% are English Language Leaners, and almost 6% are enrolled in special education. Over the past three years, John has increased his graduation rate by 2.5% and he continues to earn state distinctions in multiple areas each school year. Outside of an increase in graduation rates, state distinctions and collegiate level course offerings for students. John's school has continuously performed in the high 80s for overall student

achievement on the state exam. John has served as a principal at his current school for more than 10 years. During his interview, John said that the "best and quickest way to get people to buy into your vision for a school is to get there and show the community that you intend on staying for a while." He attributes his success to his lengthy tenure at the school, the people around him and their ability to implement the vision he has for the school.

Participant 6. Mary's school serves a student population that is 80% Hispanic and 20% Black in a low-income community. The mobility rate is 24%, more than 83% of the students are economically disadvantaged, 12% are enrolled in special education, and 16% are English Language Learners. According to Mary, the graduation rate was once 45%. She said, "the school was known as a drop-out factory and deemed a school to prison pipeline, especially for Hispanic and Black boys." Today, Mary's school boosts a 94.7% graduation rate and state tests scores that have earned the school several state distinctions in the last two years. In this case however, the test scores alone are not what make Mary an exceptional leader. Prior to taking on the role of a high school principal, Mary was an elementary school principal.

Instructional Leadership Defined

This section of the chapter details themes among the effective principal's definitions of instructional leadership. According to the effective principals in the study, instructional leadership is when the leader establishes and communicates the vision and expectations for instruction, is knowledgeable about instruction and supports and develops others. Their definitions of instructional leadership helped me to more fully grasp their perceptions of superintendent's instructional leadership later in the interviews.

Establishes and communicates the vision for instruction. In their definitions of instructional leadership, Kate, John, and Sarah each referred to the concept of establishing and communicating a vision for instruction as being a key aspect of instructional leadership. They communicated the sense that, as a unit, the school and school district must be going in the same direction and focused on the same instructional priorities. Sarah defined one feature of instructional leadership as "leading a group of individuals towards a common goal." Kate shared that a part of leading a group of individuals means messages about quality instruction have to regularly be communicated "to a variety of different people within the school setting from students to teachers to community." She emphasized the need for all stakeholders, not just those working in the school, to be clear about the instructional priorities at the campus level and the need for those priorities to align to the priorities at the district level. John referred to the vision for instruction as more than just a year-to-year plan. He shared his belief that the instructional leader's vision should be accompanied by a five-year plan for how the school and school district will achieve the established vision. He said the following:

> It is, in five years, what do we need to look like? What will it take to get us there? As we move through each year, all of the thing that we consider doing, all the things that we think about, does that get us closer to where we said we wanted to go…the instructional leader has to create that vision.

Each of the principal's emphasized the need for the vision to be established by the instructional leader in order to guide the instructional goals and expectations for the campus and the district.

Knowledgeable about instruction. Kate, John, Lisa, and Mary described instructional leadership as having a sense of broad knowledge about instruction rather than knowing the

specific details of each content area. To elaborate on this idea, John asserted his belief that one aspect of instructional leadership is acknowledging you are not on the frontline in the classroom and you are not an expert in every area. He stated the following:

> Instructional leadership is the ability of the leader to get other people to teach children well. It's the realization that you are not going to teach those kids. You are not going to grade their papers. It's also the realization that you don't know everything. I think that's one of the biggest mistakes instructional leaders sometimes make is thinking I've got a master's degree so I'm the expert.

Lisa's thinking was in line with John's when she described one aspect of instructional leadership as being "well-versed in the content", but that the instructional leader "doesn't have to be an expert in all content areas." Kate describes instructional leadership as being "aware of best practices and changes in best practices." She describes someone who keeps themselves abreast of the research, new ideas and trends in education. She shared that instructional leadership is "understanding from a broader view what is needed at each level to have quality instruction." To add to that idea, Mary asserted the notion that instructional leadership is not just knowing instruction at a high level but also, knowing how to improve instruction when as the leader, you aren't getting the results you want to see.

Kelly and Sarah's definition of instructional leadership was less broad. They described instructional leadership as having much more specific knowledge about the content areas being taught, the delivery of instructional content to students and the assessment tools being utilized to gauge student's learning. Sarah defined one aspect of instructional leadership as "utilizing the appropriate instructional instruments to meet the needs of all students." Instruments include

assessments, best instructional practices, instructional materials, and any other tool that can be used in the learning process. She argued that in order for an instructional leader to select the most appropriate instruments, the individual has to understand the needs of the students at a granular level. Kelly's definition of instructional leadership included knowing what should be taught, how it should be taught. In describing instructional leadership, Kelly went as far as to say instructional leaders should be able to go into a classroom and model instruction for a teacher. She said the following:

> So even though you can read a lesson plan or you can read the TEKS for the state, that doesn't mean you understand how it should come to fruition in the classroom. So I think the second part of being the leader is being able to not only say how it should look in a classroom, but to be able to demonstrate how it looks in the classroom.

TEKS referred to the Texas Essential Knowledge Standards, which determine what students should know and be able to do for each content area across grade levels. Being able to demonstrate the best practices in instructional delivery for a teacher for any given content area and TEKS represents the need for an instructional leader to have a very detailed level of knowledge around instruction.

Supports and develops others. In defining instructional leadership, Mary, Lisa and John each discussed the importance of an instructional leader's ability to support and develop others to grow and improve their instructional capacity and be successful. Mary described an instructional leader as being "someone who is supportive in every way, not just by giving supplies, but giving of self to really care about the people. When I say caring…someone who wants to see everybody successful." She went on to talk about the importance of building trust and being trustworthy, as

well as transparent and honest with people. She said the role of the instructional leader is to grow other people and to help other people to become "more than they ever thought they could be." Lisa related it back to not needing to be the expert at everything, but, "knowing where to go to get assistance for teacher's in their content areas regardless of what it is that they're teaching." She provided an example about Math and shared that it is not her biggest strength; however, she recognizes that she has to be able to coach and support a Math teacher. As such, she said that she has to know where to go to get help for the teacher so that the teacher is supported. In describing instructional leadership, John referenced how he goes about supporting teachers at his school. He said the following:

> You can get fired at my school, but you have to work really hard at it. And what I mean by that is we put a lot of professional development in place. We do for example, a new teacher program…we're going to support you, and we're going to send you into each other's classes, and you're going to be the support network for one another. And what we're asking you to do is every day reflect on your practice, everyday try to get just a little but better. That's all we ask.

John explained this as being the essence of instructional leadership; to put the systems in place to help teachers, help leaders, get better.

This section explained the themes among participant's definitions of instructional leadership. Three themes were described, which included the following: establish and communicate the expectations and vision for instruction, knowledge of instruction and support and develop others. The next section details how the participant's described their experiences with superintendent's instructional leadership.

Superintendent's Instructional Leadership

During the interviews, participants were asked to describe their perception of the superintendent as an instructional leader. Based on the data collected, four themes were derived to describe effective principal's perceptions of superintendent's instructional leadership. The themes are as follows: large school districts; determining the priorities and direction; competing priorities; and indirect supports.

Large school districts. When defining instructional leadership in broad terms, each of the principals described some aspects of having a strong instructional knowledge base and being able to support and develop others in a hands-on, direct manner. However, in their descriptions of their experiences with the superintendent as an instructional leader, the effective principals in the study made no direct connections to how they explained instructional leadership and the superintendent. Instead, Kate, Lisa and Mary each described how being in a large school district complicates the superintendent's ability to be an instructional leader. Kate compared a superintendent in a large, urban school district to a company CEO when she stated that being a superintendent was like "running a massive company." She said in her experience she "really didn't feel like they [superintendents] had good knowledge of instruction" but that they were more "business-oriented superintendents." In explaining what she meant by being business-oriented, Kate referred to the "financial aspects of running a district" and "the politics that you have to deal with so others [principals] can do their jobs." Kate shared that in her experience, superintendents that lacked the instructional knowledge needed to drive instruction in the district surrounded themselves with people who had that knowledge. They leaned heavily on these people to assist in making decisions related to instruction.

Mary shared that in her experience, superintendents were not instructional leaders. She said, “I haven’t found a lot of them [superintendents] that I thought were truly instructional leaders. So many of them mostly deal with vendors who have programs, and it’s not programs that change student’s lives.” In describing what would need to change for her to view the superintendent as an instructional leader, Mary told the story of a Chief School Officer (CSO) who she says was the best instructional leader she’d ever had the pleasure of working under as a principal. She said the following:

> He had us visit schools with other principals to learn about the best instructional practices that were being implemented in those schools. As a result of these visits, I began implementing close reading in my school, which led to a significant increase in my student’s reading scores on the state exam. He always followed through on everything in terms of coaching and support with how to improve close reading in my building, which has in turn made my teacher’s better and my student’s stronger readers.

Because of the size of the school district, there are many layers between the school principal and the district superintendent. Principals report directly to School Support Officers (SSOs) who in turn report directly to the CSO for a group of schools. Mary expressed her belief that the district superintendent was too high up and dealing with too many other issues to be perceived as the instructional leader.

Lisa shared Mary’s viewpoint. She also struggled with the idea of the superintendent in a large, urban school district being the instructional leader. Lisa said that while sometimes her CSO did help her with instructional matters through coaching and support, in her experience she viewed the SSO, her direct supervisor, as being an instructional leader. Lisa said the following:

> He's too far removed. I've never had the opportunity to sit down with him about instruction. I go to my supervisor. I assume it's because of the size of my district because I've only ever worked here and I've heard differently about experiences in smaller districts. I feel he's [the superintendent] got more on his plate…my instructional conversations happen with my SSOs. They are the ones that have pushed me along the years.

Lisa continued to say that the coaching she receives from her SSO is important because it is the part of instructional leadership that impacts instruction, however, in her experiences the coaching does not come from the superintendent.

Determining the priorities and direction. In their experiences, principals explained how they perceive the superintendent as being the person responsible for setting the district's goals and priorities as well as establishing a vision for where the district is headed. Principals connected this aspect of the superintendent's role to a function of instructional leadership. Lisa simply stated, "There has to be a vision. There has to be a focus." She said, in her experiences, the communication around the district's goals and priorities is not always clear and that this is needed because as a principal, it is important to her to be able to align her school's goals to that of the district. She stated, "when I am sharing my goals, I am trying to align myself to the district…It's not very specific. Their goals are so broad…there should be a specific vision around that [meeting the goals] and I don't think we always get that."

John said he looks to the superintendent to be detailed in what the direction will be and the principal's role in helping the district meet the goals. He explained, "What I need from the superintendent is to share with me the direction. Where do you see us in five years? Where do

you want us to go? What do you need from us as principals?" John's point about what is needed from principals was centered on his idea that organizations are most effective when everyone is moving in the same direction. He shared that as the instructional leader, the superintendent's job is to not only communicate what the direction is, but to hold people accountable to following the direction set forth. That includes removing individuals who are not performing. He stated, "I also get irritated when there's somebody over here and they're not trying, they're not performing, they don't care, they don't want to do it. It doesn't hurt my feelings when the superintendent goes in and let's that person know that's the end of that."

Sarah described a superintendent that she'd once worked under who had a focus on reading because "we all know that if you improve reading you will see the difference in how the students are performing across all content areas." During the interview she described how the superintendent communicated with principals around reading during "every face-to-face opportunity" he had with them, making it very clear to all school leaders that reading was a district priority. Sarah said the following:

> He would come to meeting where you brought all of your reading teacher trainers together…and basically every principal's meeting, that's what he talked about. He talked about a balanced approach to reading and how it was consistent. So he was very consistent about it and he was knowledgeable about it. I think that's a huge piece of it as well. If you were to ask him a question about the balanced approach [to reading], he'd be able to communicate it. He would say here are all the components. This is what's going on in the district. I mean it was just real clear what was expected of you as a leader.

Sarah connected her experience back to the need for a superintendent who is an instructional leader to be knowledgeable, particularly around the district's instructional priorities. In her experience, having a superintendent who set the direction for the district's instructional priorities and who could clearly articulate the instructional expectations to school leaders was representative of a true instructional leader.

In sharing her experiences with each superintendent that she's worked under, Kelly said the biggest difference was with the second superintendent. She described the sense of urgency and focus on improving test scores and put an emphasis on the need for instructional leaders. She said the following:

> There was an extreme focus on raising test scores, which made principals have to become more instructional leaders rather than people who created systems in a building and did the bus duty, books and budgets. So it forced principals and it forced people who were hiring principals to look for people who were strong in instruction and that could move campuses within a year or two. So being under his leadership, it created a different focus in the district than we were used to…it wasn't just the principal as the instructional leader, it was everyone on the team.

In her experiences, Kelly's described how the superintendent set the expectation for principals to be the instructional leaders on their campuses alongside their administrative teams and for those supervising principals to be instructional leaders who supported the goal of increasing student achievement outcomes throughout the district. She shared that although at the time this was a new direction, it is one that has continued to be the expectation of the superintendents that have

come after the one who'd initially established this vision of instructional leadership for the district.

Competing priorities. One of the obstacles the participants described as being characteristic of leading a large, urban school district is the management of competing priorities. Principals explained how priorities outside of instruction distract the superintendent and disconnect the superintendent from what is happening instructionally at the campus level. The participants named a variety of reasons that they attribute to the disconnect that occurs between the superintendent and instructional leadership. Lisa attributed the superintendent's disconnect with instructional leadership to the multitude of unexpected emergencies and situations that naturally occur in a large, urban school district. She provided the following explanation:

> The instructional leader is, I feel like, a myth because superintendents are dealing with other types of things. I feel like parent complaints, politics, issues that are super sensitive, the union's fighting here, that teacher hit a kid, this teacher harassed this teacher. Instruction seems like something on a smaller scale in light of these things, but it is very important. I think that we lose focus around instruction the higher we go because you're having to put out these fire for people."

Lisa argued that in her experiences, when these types of incidents occur, they become the priority over instruction. If you have a school with a high rate of parent complaints, high union activity, in a highly political community, then instruction can become less and less of a priority.

Mary shared Lisa's thoughts about politics being one of many competing priorities that disconnect the superintendent from their role as an instructional leader. She described how

politics influence superintendent's decision making processes, making it difficult for them to make decisions that truly benefit all children. She shared the following:

> I have found that too many, especially when you get into a school district like this, they get lost. They may come in with high motives and really want to make a difference, but because of politics, they get swept away in that sea of empty promises and the politics of it all.

Kate's experiences have led her to have a more positive outlook on politics than Mary. Kate argued that she feels superintendents have to deal with the politics so that she has the space needed to do her job as a principal effectively without political interference. Coupled with politics, Kate shared that in her experience, in a time when educational funding is being pulled back and resources are becoming more and more scarce, budgets have also become a priority. Messages about district funding, and the lack thereof, are shared just as much as communication regarding the district's instructional priorities, if not more. Funding is critical to the conversation around instructional leadership because it is one of the few aspects of the district's functioning principals in this study believe superintendents make instructional leadership decisions around.

Indirect supports. The principals in this study each shared that although, superintendents have not frequented their campuses to visit classrooms, engage in professional development or professional learning communities, which are ways in which superintendents might directly serve as instructional leaders by supporting schools, they do act as instructional leaders by providing indirect supports to schools based on the district's priorities. Some of these indirect supports include listening to key stakeholders, recognizing principal's success, hiring key personnel to establish and support school-based initiatives and programming, making

budgeting decisions that support the district's instructional priorities, and assigning the appropriate team members to develop school leader and teacher trainings aligned to the district's instructional priorities and expectations.

In sharing her story about the superintendent who prioritized improving reading across the district, Sarah shared that one of the ways in which the superintendent acted as an instructional leader was through putting resources, in the form of human capital, towards successfully implementing the district's instructional focus. She said, the following:

> He put money into resources, he put tons of money into people as far as supporting and the support stayed in place for quite some time. And it was not a large group of support. It was divided per area. There were four reading trainers assigned to support just reading…so that support was consistent and it went all the way up to upper management. There was a reading manager and an assistant to the manager… he had a direct report that just focused on reading. So there were tons of layers of support to assure that students were reading on grade level.

Sarah described how the support was not just from a financial aspect, but also in the form of personnel assigned to support schools with meeting the superintendent's instructional expectations and ultimately, increasing student achievement. In alignment with Sarah's experiences around how superintendents use personnel as a resource to support the instructional priorities of the district, Mary argued, "it's not programs that change student's lives. It's people." She explained her experiences by making note that "people run the program and the people are the ones who make it successful. The program cannot work to improve student achievement alone." Kelly had this same line of reasoning when she described the mark of a strong

superintendent who is an instructional leader. She said, “that’s the thing about putting people in place that can sustain programs that you introduce or developments that you create, now that the superintendent is gone, it’s [the district’s literacy program] still an integral part of what we do at the elementary level to get kids prepared to be on grade level for middle and high school.”

Each principal referred to their experience with superintendent’s instructional leadership by describing how superintendents have funded instructional programs or initiatives created to improve student achievement. The elementary and middle school principals interviewed recalled variations of reading programs that were created and supported by superintendents through budgetary decision-making. The high school principals interviewed referred to funding for the district’s dual credit and advanced placement initiatives, both of which were put in place to assist high school students with earning college credit prior to their matriculation into a four year university. Lisa summarized this concept of instructional leadership through financial decision-making when she said, “The monetary piece is either you’re going to have the money for it, or you’re not going to have the money for it. How do you spend your money? How do you hire your employees?...What does that support look like for teachers? What does support look like for principals.” Lisa went as far as to say board members should be holding superintendents, the district’s instructional leader, accountable for how they are spending the money and if it is being done effectively.

Kate and John had a somewhat softer approach to describing their experiences with superintendent’s instructional leadership. The indirect supports they referred to throughout the interviews centered on the idea of the superintendent listening to all stakeholders and recognizing success. The concept of success was directly tied to progress and achievement

around the instructional priorities and expectations set by the superintendent. Kate described her experiences with superintendent's who listen to principals in an attempt to learn about them and their challenges as the instructional leaders at the school level. She said the following:

> I think that superintendents ultimately will be in a position where they have to surround themselves with others that understand instruction more deeply. They are at least listening to all of the challenges of instruction, all of the challenges that principals have as instructional leaders, and then trying to use that I think to not only make decisions, but perhaps to make decisions about also the people that they need to surround themselves with.

In our interviews she discussed her experiences with superintendents who come from educational backgrounds and those that have landed in the superintendent's seat through less traditional means. Regardless of how the superintendent became the leader of a school district, Kate said listening and making principals feel like he or she understands their world is an important aspect of instructional leadership.

John described a superintendent's instructional leadership by way of telling a story about a superintendent he once worked under who made recognizing principal's success a standing agenda item during monthly, district-wide principal's meetings. He said the following:

> I would literally walk out of a principal's meeting and think; I cannot let this guy down. I've got to go back and kill myself to get this done. It was example after example after example of principals doing things that he wanted us to do that moved us most. Celebrating the things that moved us toward the goal. Little things like, before we had Aspire, we had an incentive program and one year my grand total was $900. They were

> all in the thousand dollar or less range. But the way those were distributed…you went to a principal's meeting and [the superintendent] came up front and he's got this stack of checks in his hand. Every single principal is called up to the front, handed a check and he can tell you from memory about this principal, what they've done, why they deserve this, and all these things they've done.

John and Kate's perceptions of superintendent's instructional leadership stretches beyond teacher and principal support, training, instructional programming, and initiatives and funding. For them, the personal interactions with a superintendent who listens to, acknowledges and celebrates principals also contribute to indirect supports superintendents provide when engaging in instructional leadership.

This section explained the themes among participant's experiences with and perceptions of superintendent's instructional leadership. Four themes were explained, which included the following: large school districts; determining the priorities and direction; competing priorities; and indirect supports. In describing superintendent's overall instructional leadership, Lisa captured it best when she said, "visionary, focus, setting direction, motivating, inspiring, supporting and developing…all of that is instructional leadership. All of it is." The next section describes how the participant's described their experiences with superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs.

Superintendent's Instructional Leadership Beliefs

Effective principals in the study found it somewhat challenging to answer questions related to their perceptions of superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs. Questions were often met with hesitation, confused facial expressions, and requests to ask the question again.

Kate's first response to the question, for example, was, "well, I mean, that's kind of hard", while Lisa's first response to the question was simply "mm-mmm", followed by a long pause. When I probed each principal around why the question was met with hesitation, Kate and Lisa shared it was difficult to describe their perceptions of a superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs because any explicit communication from superintendents regarding their instructional leadership beliefs is rare. Kelly, John, and Sarah explained their perceptions of superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs by providing examples of superintendent's behaviors. Although Mary shared her experiences with superintendents who did communicate their instructional leadership beliefs with stakeholders, she too examined their actions when forming her opinions on rather or not the superintendents truly meant what they said. As a result of her analysis, Mary characterized superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs as nothing more than "political talk." She explained that based on her experiences, superintendent's actions rarely aligned with their stated beliefs. She explained the following:

> I have seen a lot of superintendents who will verbalize one thing and their behavior indicates something else. I heard verbalized how much they care about all people. How much they care about people in poverty, how they want to help all students, how much they believe that we should be dedicated to that purpose, to that cause. I've heard them say that, but I have seen very few of them that acted on that, which showed in their behavior.

Mary went on to say if superintendents were truly concerned about all students the way they said, the school district would have fewer low performing schools in low income neighborhoods. Regardless of rather or not superintendents were perceived to put their beliefs on display through

their actions, there were some common themes that surfaced among principal's perceptions of superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs. These themes included building relationships, coaching and developing principals and learning for all students. The section below explains each of the three themes in detail.

Coaching and developing principals. The act of superintendents supporting school leaders through coaching surfaced as a theme in this study. Principals shared stories of their former and current superintendents taking time to mentor principals, acknowledge their good work and provide training opportunities. Because of these types of experiences with superintendents, the participants in the study determined the superintendents believed in growing and developing principals through coaching. In describing her experiences with one superintendent, Kelly explained, **"**he believed that instructional leadership was important, but that we needed to give people time to process, people time to learn, people time to grow in their position." Kate remembered the training she was provided as a new principal and said, "[the superintendent] believed in coaching and developing leaders." She explained, "As a principal, I knew exactly what things I needed to do through the district for whatever it was that we were implementing. I remember when I was hired, the first summer that I came in, I immediately went to a three or four day training and it wasn't all these different sessions. It was on one thing…and I took that back to my campus because guess what, when you equip me, then I can go equip my teachers." The training Kate received formed her perception of the superintendent's instructional leadership belief around coaching and developing leaders.

For John it was the individualized coaching conversations between him and former superintendents. John told the story of how his superintendent would call him up and have

mentoring conversations with him. At the time John says he didn't even realize what the superintendent was doing. John explained, "those conversations were a way for him to mentor me without my understanding of what was happening at the time, but to keep his hand on where I was going and help guide me through what I needed to do." John explained how the superintendent believed coaching meant allowing him to do his job as a principal while simultaneously refining his decision-making process. He described the superintendent as one who would never let him make a mistake that was too big to fix, thus allowing him to make mistakes he could learn from, which in time, made him a better school leader. John captured the essence of the coaching and developing he experienced when he said the superintendent "saw it as his responsibility to guide me without crushing me."

Building relationships. When explaining their perceptions of superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, principals described superintendents whose belief is centered on the importance of building relationships with principals. Principals described these superintendents as being strategic and individualized in their approach. One by one, Kate gave example after example of superintendents she's worked for and how they went about building an individualized relationship with her. In one example, she described a superintendent who grew up in the school district, matriculating through different roles such as teacher and school psychologist before eventually becoming the superintendent. Kate explained how he held one-on-one conversations with principals as a part of the hiring process. She said, "It was a conversation. It wasn't like a drill session of what you are going to do, what you are going to bring, how you are going to change this. It was a conversation and I remember our conversations to this day." In another example, Kate described a superintendent who asked her the same

question about mangoes all the time because she was from Palm Beach County. She explained how she equated that to relationship building because "who remembers that when you have so many principals." It made her feel like the superintendent took the time to get to know her and build a relationship with her by strategically finding that one thing that he could connect with her and using that as a springboard for their relationship.

John described how superintendents used face-to-face interactions with principals to build relationships and how, through this action, it became evident that the need to build positive relationships with principals was an instructional leadership belief of the superintendent. He said this is important because "superintendents can't run every campus. They have to know me well enough to trust that I am going to do what's right by children in my school." John also described experiences similar to Kate's whereas superintendents used specific information about principals as leverage to build a positive relationship. John described his experiences with superintendents who celebrated and recognized the work of the principals on an individual basis. He said, "The purpose was to create a connection with that leader, to recognize they were working very hard, to build that relationship."

Learning for all students. After giving some thought to their perceptions of superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, principals articulated the idea that superintendents believe all students need to be learning. Each principal articulated this perception in a different way, some more directly than others. For example, in her response to the question around what her perceptions of superintendent's beliefs are, Sarah simply stated, "that it's important that we meet the needs of all students." Kelly shared the same perception around meeting the needs of all students, but she added to it the idea that superintendents in her

experiences did not believe a student's background or circumstances should dictate their educational outcomes. In reference to one superintendent in particular, she shared the following:

> He would say, here's what the data says about your campus. The campus across town has the same kids as you and they are doing it and he would give some prime examples. And sometimes they weren't schools that looked like you. Sometimes they were schools that got to choose their kids, but his point was, if they can do it, you ought to be able to do it too. It may be harder for you to do it, but I don't think he really cared. You needed to make it happen for what's best for kids.

In Lisa and Kelly's experiences, all students truly meant ALL students regardless of the student's neighborhood, background, race and ethnicity or socio-economic status.

When sharing his experiences and perceptions, John differentiated the great superintendents from those who were not great. He described the "not so great" superintendents as being more focused on the power and authority that comes with being a superintendent in a large, urban school district; however, John said the great superintendents "always were about kids first." He explained how the great superintendents communicated to principals that it was going to be kids first. He said the message was "all kids matter." Kate expanded on the concept of all kids learning, but she also described this belief as being "the bare minimum" mainly because of her idea that the primary job function of the superintendent is to ensure all students are successful in their learning. She said the following:

> I think that every superintendent that I've worked with believed it's learning for all kids, regardless of the circumstances, regardless of the funding, regardless of the challenges. We're talking about high levels of learning for all kids. I do believe that, from all

> superintendents, maybe give or take one, that I heard that consistently because I also believe that's their job and if they're not somehow delivering that message, then they have a board that is going to help align them. At a minimum, that's what you've got so say. That's what your job is. All kids.

Lisa's experience with superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, and the specific belief in all students learning, was framed around the concept of learning equality. She said, "I believe they want all children to have equal access, and equal access is not equal." She explained her experiences with superintendents who fight for the rights of minorities to receive a quality education and whose decisions are meant to have a positive impact on the learning outcomes for the students they serve.

Sarah also perceived superintendent's instructional leadership belief to be centered on the notion that all students needed to be learning, however, her experience was somewhat different than the other principals in regards to superintendent's actions being aligned to their beliefs. She described her experiences with a superintendent who believed principals needed to come to the job ready to be an instructional leader because "kid's lives were at stake" and one who believed all students needed to be learning. As such, unlike Mary's experiences, Sarah described superintendents "whose actions certainly made you realize that his beliefs were truly his beliefs. She said, "if you weren't doing what's best for kids, and you weren't making that happen very quickly, then you were having those serious conversations about your future with the district."

Principal's perceptions of superintendent's belief that learning needs to be occurring for all students was the one belief that principals in this study consistently seemed to be unsure around. As such, one of the questions I posed to the principals in this study was regarding type

actions superintendents needed to take in order to demonstrate through their actions the belief that learning needs to be occurring for all students. The actions described by principals as aligned to this specific belief all centered on the supports campuses received, retention practices for high performing teachers and school leaders and budgeting decisions. For example, Kate discussed how superintendents fund and allocate central office positions to support schools. She said the following:

> It's not realistic to think that you're going to be able to accomplish all kids learning without the personnel in place. It's just not realistic…I think that that's what happens a lot of times when you talk about district level supports. When you have a massive district, you can't have just one math person. That's just not realistic because that person is pulled in too many different directions. So that would be an example… making sure that all of those critical departments are staffed well to be able to give support to the school and then, potentially, I think looking at those positions that are not necessarily direct contact to the school and then looking at how those positions should be supported in the school. Because I think ultimately, the district office does exist to support campuses and I don't think that it always trickles down to the campuses that way.

As it relates to the retention of high performing teachers and school leaders, principals quoted the research around the impact of highly effective teachers and school leaders. In doing so, they shared their belief that superintendents should make decisions that would allow the district to create the conditions needed to retain highly effective teachers and leaders if they authentically hold the belief in all students learning at high levels across the school district. As it relates to retaining effective principals, John discussed the following:

> So for example, if we have rampant turnover of campus leadership, as an instructional leader, the superintendent should know the research. He should know that the most, not to disparage any other group, one of the key, one of the most important roles in the school in terms of when we've identified successful schools has been the role of the principal. Not just the skill of the principal, but the tenure, the longevity. It takes time to mold a faculty. It takes time to move and going in a consistent direction. If we've got a new direction every year at a campus, we're going nowhere fast.

As it relates to retaining highly effective teachers, Sarah discussed the following:

> Well, everything has to be centered around their belief, and making sure that it's aligned to what's actually happening in the schools. So for example, if you believe that all students should be able to learn, what are some of the components that need to be in place in order for kids to learn? Is there a strong leader in every school? Are there teachers that are highly effective in every single school?…So you need to center your work around making sure that there is a highly effective principal, making sure that there are highly effective teachers, making sure that the intervention systems are strong and able to support the different levels of the students that the school is serving. The superintendent has to provide all of the support pieces in all of those areas to ensure that those things are happening, not just say, "I believe this should happen."

Lisa's take on what superintendents needed to do to align their actions to their beliefs focused on the funding provided to school that, according to Lisa, "positions the school to produce." She said the following:

> We're attacking so many other things, that you're going to have to funnel money my way, so that I can make decisions about what resources I need: do I need personnel, do I need programs, whatever it is that I'll need, he's going to have to funnel money towards those initiatives. Money is always going to be an issue. Money is always necessary. So when you look at it at this level… it's always going to be about how much money did you funnel into this particular school where you believe all kids can learn.

It was evident that the approach to what actions need to be evident in superintendent's daily practices to align to the stated beliefs around all students learning varied among the effective principals in this study. This variation was due to the lack of certainty among principals regarding rather or not superintendents in their experiences actually put their beliefs around all students learning into practice.

This section explained the themes among participant's experiences with superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs. Three themes were explained, which included the following: building relationships, coaching and developing principals and learning for all students. The next section describes how the participant's described their lived experiences with superintendent's instructional leadership knowledge.

Superintendent's Instructional Leadership Knowledge

During the interviews, participants were asked to describe their perceptions of the superintendent's instructional leadership knowledge. This section details themes among effective principal's perceptions of superintendent's instructional leadership knowledge in a large, urban school district. The data analysis resulted in the creation of three themes used to describe effective principal's perceptions of superintendent's instructional leadership knowledge. The

themes are as follows: specific knowledge, broad knowledge and relying on the experts. The section below explains each of the three themes in detail.

Specific knowledge. John asserted the belief that all superintendents must have "some concept of what good instruction looks like." He argued, as an instructional leader in any size school district, if there is a superintendent who doesn't that is something they've "got to figure out" because "they've got to have that." This idea was common across the effective principals interviewed so the question became, "what specific instructional knowledge have you perceived superintendents to have and need." Based on their experiences, principals identified three areas of specific knowledge they believe are characteristic of superintendents who are instructional leaders: knowledge of school data, Reading and cross-content instructional best practices.

Kelly described one superintendent who had both broad and specific knowledge. She provided an example around how this superintendent had a very specific vision, but the plan for how the district would go about accomplishing that vision was very broad and general. Kelly also referred to this superintendent's broad knowledge of district and campus level data. She said, "If he talked about participation in SAT, the conversation was, around what we needed to do to get more kids to participate in the SAT." According to Kelly, this superintendent did not provide the actual data or any clear expectations around what needed to happen instructionally and systematically to see a positive change in the data. She compared this superintendent to another superintendent who she says, changed the district's culture because of his specific knowledge of data and his knowledge of what specific practices needed to change in schools to improve the data. Kelly described the following:

> Superintendent two, when he talked about SAT, he came out and said there are 10% African-American males taking the SAT and their scores are an average of. There are 3% Hispanic-Americans taking-- so he was very succinct and very detailed, he was very data-based and he knew. When he spoke, he spoke in detail about things. And so then when he rolled out a plan, or when he directed you to roll out a plan, your plan better be succinct and in detail as well. Why don't you have X amount of kids graduating? And it wasn't like, "Okay I want a three-year plan to increase graduation." No. It was, "Next year this better not happen and we better go from our 89% graduation rate to 93%." Whatever it was, he was very detailed and succinct about what his goal was, or what his goal was for you to reach to make sure that kids are not being left behind. So that was a big culture shift for the district.

Kelly continued to talk about how this was a huge culture shift or the district from a superintendent who had very little specific knowledge to one who knew the details of school's data better than some of the principals. She said, "Now, we have somebody who confirms numbers, and confirms stats, and confirms not only at the district level, but down to the different ethnicities within the district and at each school."

Kate described her experiences with superintendents who had the specific knowledge around school data that Kelly described, but lacked specific knowledge around the impact of the state accountability system on the daily practices and decision making at the school levels. She explained the following:

> I think that some superintendents are disconnected from what that every day in a school looks like. What does that mean when a child doesn't pass the test? It's easy to talk about

> globally, they didn't pass the test, but I think that that superintendent has to have a good understanding of the state accountability system and how that connects to just every day learning that happens in the school, because the state accountability system is not all.

Kate made the point that the accountability system, and the data collected as a result of that system, does not tell the full story of the learning happening on a campus from day to day. Based on her experiences, she argued the need for superintendents to know more in this particular area.

Another area of specific knowledge discussed by several of the effective principals in this study was around Reading, specifically the components of an effective Reading program and the components that need to be in place in order to help a struggling reader improve. For example, Sarah explained the following:

> So what are some of the key components to getting the student to read or what are some of the key components that can help a struggling reader? So is fluency a key component? Should those students have a strong phonics base? How much time should they be reading independently? How much small group instruction should be taken place? So those are the key pieces that they need to know as far as in the area of reading is concerned that is going to support each campus instructionally in providing the intervention necessary for those kids who are struggling, and then just basically what is our foundation for teaching kids how to read?

Lisa approached this topic from the standpoint of superintendents knowing what it looks like to coach a secondary principal around improving the Literacy skills among his or her students. She said the following:

> I think that if you're going to be strong in anything, it needs to be in reading like, "How do I get children to read from little to older? What does that look like at a high school level? How can I help my high school principal say, "Hey, I know you don't have background in elementary, but this is what it looks like to teach kids how to read from the ground up." This is the trainings that you need to send your teachers to, because this is how we teach them how to decode, these are the five skills of reading that they need to have, you need to understand the five components.

Directly in line with Sarah and Lisa's thinking, Kate also stressed the importance of having specific knowledge in the area of Reading. She described how Reading has always been a struggle in the districts she's worked in and related this area of need back to the superintendent's ability to make sound decisions. She said the following:

> Like, for example, when I think about any district that I've ever been in, no matter how large, how small, it goes back to a foundation of kids learning to read. If the superintendent doesn't understand some of that process, that how does that start in kinder and progress through the grades…I think that they have to have a good foundation of how it starts, because how it starts is kind of helping you to direct how you're going to end up. So I would want them to understand that, not necessarily precisely but understand what components need to be there, what needs to be present because I think that that's also going to help them to decipher information that they're getting, make decisions about programming, etc.

For each of these principals, Reading served as a key example of the specific knowledge a superintendent in a large, urban school district must posses in order to make decisions that will improve Literacy across the district.

Another area where principals agreed superintendents in large, urban school district should have specific knowledge is in the area of best instructional practices. They discussed the idea of knowing what good instructional looks like at a very basic level, even if the superintendent is not well versed in specific content areas. Lisa said, "Best practices because best practices can go across all content areas. So I think that overall, the person needs to be strong in best practices." Kate had a similar response and explained the following:

> I think that they'd need to understand, I think at a foundational level, what good instruction looks like. What should it look like in an everyday classroom? I don't think it has to be with any specificity as far as in reading, math, etc., but I think that there are foundational things that have to happen in every classroom to make that a working good classroom for all kids.

Sarah argued without this type of specific knowledge, superintendents will have difficulty in leading the school district in any particular direction because they will have an inability to make decisions related to instruction. She said the following:

> They need to know what are some of the key instructional practices that should be happening in the school district. I think it's very difficult to lead if you have no clue of what should be happening…some strong instructional practices, what are some of the things that we should be seeing as far as core subjects, what are some of the things that should be happening that are research-based that work for the type of district that I'm

> leading? If I'm leading a large urban school district, what helps urban children be successful? I think that they need to know exactly what should be happening instructionally.

Each of the principals described how superintendents with specific knowledge around best instructional practices could engage them in conversations around instruction during school visits and in forums such as principal's meetings. Kate said:

> As I'm talking to them about my school, for example, I may be talking about kids and where they're performing at different levels, I want to know he doesn't just understand just the paper pieces in a sense, or what they send out about the accountability system…I want him to know what that truly means as far as how it relates to student learning.

To the effective principals in this study it quickly became clear when they were being led by a superintendent who did not know data, Reading and best instructional practices because the messages and communication from these superintendents were much more general, rather than specific. In their experiences, these effective principals found it much more difficult to follow direction from superintendents lacking these types of specific knowledge.

Broad knowledge. With the exception of having specific knowledge around school data, Reading and instructional best practices, the principals interviewed perceive superintendents as having general or broad knowledge about instruction, and other district functions. Throughout the interviews, it seems for principals, that they idea of knowledge around instructional leadership began and ended in the classrooms. They equated knowledge to being able analyze and assess teacher practices, various aspects of curriculum and knowledge of the content areas such as Reading, Math, Science and Social Studies. For example, Mary said, "most of them say

they know a lot about instructional leadership, but I don't think they do. They may know administration and administrative duties, but as far as going into the classroom [shakes her head no]. They go buy programs and put it in and expect students to learn." Kate expressed the same idea in her description of superintendent's broad knowledge. She said the following:

> They [superintendents] don't really know enough about kids and instruction and how it really happens. Honestly, there are a lot of superintendents that don't have a clue about what happens in the classroom...I think most superintendents have broad knowledge, they have research-based knowledge. They have lots of things you can read in books. I don't necessarily know that it's day-to-day what happens, and at the end of the day, the rubber meets the road in the classroom."

Kate shared that in her experiences, if a superintendent does go with her into a classroom, they look for "something superficial." She makes sense of this by connecting superintendent's lack of deep knowledge to the focus on test scores. She said, "I think some superintendents very much buy into that state system, not they necessarily want to but, I think its what they have and also what they're held accountable for by the board. Kate argues that this focus on state accountability makes superintendents less of an instructional leader.

Lisa explained how she bases her perceptions regarding a superintendent's knowledge on rather or not they have had experiences as a principal. She said the following:

> I think when they share stories about their experiences as a principal, that's when I kind of have an idea of what they know or don't know. So I make an assumption they understand our plight. They understand they work we do... I think it depends on where they have their experience... If they've been a principal before, I think they have enough

> experiences under their belt to say, at the elementary level, this is what I think should be doing. At the middle school level, this is what I think we should be doing.

Regardless of a superintendent's background and experiences, Lisa shared that she still believes superintendents in large, urban school districts have broad knowledge, primarily due to the size of the district. She said, " I think it's going to be broad in some areas and I think it's going to be very specific in some areas. Everyone has to have broad knowledge about how to manage a district this size and then roll it forward so that we're making a difference in student's lives. They can't know details about everything."

Sarah perceives superintendent's knowledge as an instructional leader as being "very surface." She explained the following:

> They understand that school districts need to have a curriculum. They need to follow the curriculum. We need to make sure that it's aligned to what's going on in the state. We have to have assessments to assess what students are learning. We have to know how are we responding when students don't learn, how are we accelerating students when they do learn.

What Sarah described was the ability for a superintendent in a large, urban school district to be able to make the connections as an instructional leader. Those connections, between the curriculum and student learning, represent the basic level of instructional knowledge superintendents need to have and in her experiences, have had. John also discussed the need to make connections and have a general knowledge about curriculum and the instructional process. He shared that for him, it has always been important to know that he could sit down with his

superintendent and have an “intelligent conversation” about instruction. He explained the following:

> The understanding that there is a relationship between scope and sequence and assessment, and that we are doing something positive to try to align that. For the superintendent to get that, that’s very important. You want to know that the superintendent has enough instructional knowledge to make decisions.

Sarah also couched the concept of broad knowledge in this notion of the superintendent having enough information to make good decisions or to ensure the people that have been hired have theta knowledge to make the best decisions. She provided an example about knowing enough about the curriculum to guarantee curricular decisions being made for the district are good, sound decisions. She explained:

> You have to have some sort of curriculum knowledge to be able to articulate and communicate those type of decisions that you're making based on what you're observing in some of the classrooms. And as your person who you put in charge of curriculum or all the individuals that work with curriculum within the district and being able to articulate it to your leaders, you have to be able to make some sort of instructional connections and have a clear understanding of where the district is trying to go. If you want to try literacy in the middle schools, then you have to have some sort of knowledge around literacy in middle schools, and why is literacy important? What happens with literacy at that particular grade level? It's not deep knowledge, but it's enough knowledge to able to make sure that the decisions that are made are sound decisions.

Outside of Sarah's perception of superintendent having broad knowledge, the idea that superintendents in large, urban school districts have people around them who engage in instructional decision-making for the school district is a perception among principals that continued to surface repeatedly throughout the interviews. This perception is explained in further detail in the section below.

Relying on the experts. During the interviews, it became evident that having broad knowledge as a superintendent is not negatively perceived by principals. In fact, they seemed to make sense of the notion of superintendents having broad knowledge by noting that having broad knowledge when leading a large, urban school district is not only realistic, but expected. Kate explained the following:

> There as some things that you know very, very deeply. There are other things where you are surrounding yourself with people who act as your diggers. As my digger, it means that you have all the intricate details. I know enough just to be dangerous to know that when you're not leading me in the right direction or what to ask you, what to be expecting in results, and I also know enough to when to check-in. I think that's what superintendents have on a much bigger scale.

Lisa likened the superintendency to the presidency in that, she says her experience is that the superintendent has to be "global, whereas, while extremely intelligent and probably well-versed in some areas versus others, he has to surround himself with those people he can trust to tell him when he's not going in the right direction."

Kate described her view that having a background in education, specifically as a former principal, does not only help superintendents in their decision-making process, but that it also

helps principals buy into the advice and coaching they receive from a superintendent more easily. She told the story her two superintendent friends of hers, one who is a former businessman and the other who is a former teacher and principal. Below, she describes her interaction with each friend:

> I have a friend who is a superintendent, two friends who are superintendents, and they're different. My friend that's in [redacted], he's a business guy and he knows it. We have this argument all the time. You're a business guy. You're not going to tell me about the reading program. You don't know anything about the reading program except what the vendor told you and the person in the reading department told you. Whereas [redacted], he knows. He is going to know what it is because I think he's still got that teacher in him, that principal in him, where he's thinking about his district as his school. He's going tp research it and pick it apart. We have those arguments.

In essence, Kate is arguing that former experience as a principal makes a superintendent more credible in the eyes of a principal. She said this is because superintendents with former experience as an educator have a greater chance at "connecting with principals, teachers and students." However, Kate still held to her view that a superintendent's knowledge is broad. She made it clear that in her experiences, the further a person is away from the classroom, the less knowledgeable they become over time about what happens in the classroom on a daily basis.

Sarah described part of the superintendent's role as an instructional leader as being someone who manages, or facilitates the act of making sure people are in place who have the deep knowledge. She said:

> As far as the details about each of the core content areas, I don't think that exists. But I think they [superintendents] rely on individuals to lead those particular areas for them, and they're just pretty much surface curriculum people unless that's their expertise and background before coming into the superintendency…they're pretty much the facilitator. They're just at that awareness level.

Sarah shared that in her experiences, there is not a need for a superintendent in a large, urban school district to have that deep knowledge in every area. She explained that having enough knowledge of each area to be able to identify the right team members, people with the specific knowledge and skillset that matches the needs of the district. However, Sarah argued the need for superintendents to know enough to effectively guide the district in the right direction. She explained the following:

> So basically whomever they hire to do the work is pretty much the expert, but as a superintendent, are you just going to totally rely on the expert or are you going to have the basic knowledge to know if that doesn't sound right or that's not appropriate, maybe you need to look into this. In having zero knowledge, you can't even challenge the work that's happening in your school district.

Sarah continued by describing superintendents who displayed a high level of trust for the experts they hired, however, in her experiences, those superintendents were still well-versed enough in instruction to be able to distinguish whether or not the district was headed in the right direction.

In John's experiences, he said not relying on others and surrounding yourself with the experts can lead to the superintendent's failure as a leader. He explained:

> He needs data. He needs to know where we are. He needs to know how much money we've got. He's got to be making a financial plan for how we're going to get there. That's his job, to translate finances and where we need to go with the data, all of those pieces. All the more reason he needs experts around him that stay on top of that, that he trusts, that he's got a relationship with to bring him correct information and give him a true picture. But if he focuses on that, that is the downfall of the district…it's easy to put your eyes on that, and take your eyes off of the other things we've been talking about such as what the vision is, where we're going and the relationships it's going to take to get there.

John described the need to surround oneself with experts as being the "most important thing any leader can do." Like many of the other principals interviewed, he emphasized the need for a superintendent to understand what he knows and what he doesn't know rather than trying to be the expert in everything. He said, "the superintendent has to surround himself with good people. Train them. Support them." In her discussion, Kate also referenced the idea that the superintendent must "know what he doesn't know and when he's not really the expert in a situation." She explained, during those times, the superintendent must "let it be that other person."

Mary shared her view that the superintendency is not about how much the superintendent knows but rather, how well he inspires those around him to do the work. She said:

> I think that most superintendents have an ability to inspire right actions in people… I think so many superintendents miss their opportunity to be inspirational and that

> sometimes the knowledge really can be overlooked if you are inspiring enough to those around you where that really trickles through.

Mary argued the idea that superintendents in a large, urban school district have to work through a lot of people. The likened the role to that of a principal who has to work through teachers to increase student achievement. She said, “I don’t teach students every day”, but she strives to inspire those that do. In her experience, the role of the superintendent is no different.

This section explained the themes among participant’s experience with superintendent’s instructional leadership knowledge. Three themes were explained, which included the following: specific knowledge, broad knowledge and relying on the experts. The next section describes how the participant’s described their lived experiences with superintendent’s instructional leadership practices.

Superintendent’s Instructional Leadership Practices

Participants in this study were asked to describe their perceptions of the superintendent’s instructional leadership practices. This section details themes among effective principal’s perceptions of superintendent’s instructional leadership practices in a large, urban school district. The data analysis resulted in the creation of five themes used to describe effective principal’s perceptions of superintendent’s instructional leadership practices. The themes are as follows: communication and collaborative goal setting; sets non-negotiable expectations for student achievement and instruction; hires and manages the experts; aligns campus supports to district priorities; and monitors expectations for instruction. The section below explains each of the five themes in detail.

Communication and collaborative goal setting. During the interviews it became evident that the act of communication was a practice principals deemed to be important and critical to their ability to carry out the vision of the superintendent and then align themselves, and their campuses, with the goals and direction of the school district. Mary explained, "I think the superintendent has to front load the goals. Everyone has to know exactly how we're going to get there and what is going to be used in order to get us there." John's perceptions around communication entail much more than the practice of articulating goals and steps to get there. He commented, "communication is culture, and culture is communication." When asked to help me understand more of what he meant, John explained the following:

> I mean they are interdependent upon one another. You have to intentionally use the communication to shape the culture that you want. The communication that you hear is also reflective of the culture that you have… He's [the superintendent] got to put that messaging out there, and it's got to be consistent…If he wants to change an attitude, he's got to say it at least 10 times in order to begin…so where is he going? What's important to him? He needs to be a broken record with the message. As superintendent, when they speak for a district, has to set that direction. The superintendent has to set the direction that we believe that our kids can accomplish more than they think they can. That's a message that permeates the school district and it does become the self-fulfilling prophecy.

When asked what consistent communication that changes attitudes looks like in practice John continued with the following:

> It's consistently dropping those things in those staff meetings… I think that's a big practice that superintendents do. The next thing is continually pointing us back towards what it's about, that it's about kids. Citing that, keeping that vision before us of where we need to go…So kind of every time they get up to communicate, they're reiterating, this is where we're going and this is what I'm about. The superintendent in public is a broken record of those things. They've got to constantly say those things.

As an example of when he's worked with a superintendent who created culture through communication, he referenced his experiences with one of the first superintendents in the school district. He described the following:

> There have been times in the district where that has been very clear and, again, not to be a broken record, but there was never a time when it was clearer than under [redacted]. Every time you went to a principal meeting, everything you did, that's what was out there in front of us. When you went to a [redacted] principal's meeting, you thought you went to an evangelistic revival. He just was that charismatic in the way that he talked about what our mission was. It was always articulated, "This is what we're doing and this is what that looks like," every time he spoke to us…I think, again, if you want those things to happen in a district or in a school, that's one of the things that the leader has to do over, and over, and over again, is articulate what it looks like.

Kate described communication as a two-way process. She said it is not just constantly sharing the goals, vision and direction of the school district. It was evident that listening was also a key component of the communication process, based on her experiences. Kate discussed the importance of listening to a variety of stakeholders in the school district so the superintendent is

aware of what the concerns are, what is working and what ideas each of the various communities has around the goals and the direction of the school district. She said the following:

> I think a lot of conversation…with a variety of stakeholders. So I think one of the things that I'm really, really happy about with our current superintendent is just the conversations. I do love the way that he went around the district when he first got here because I think at the end of the day it was trying to show people that I'm here to listen. There are tons of things going on and different groups of stakeholders have different concerns depending on what side of the district they're on. He sent the message, "I'm just here to listen and hear your concerns." So I think that that's probably one of the largest things a superintendent can do is to listen, but listen to everybody about what the goals need to be.

Kate said in her experiences, even when the district's stakeholders do not fully agree with the goals and direction that have been set by the superintendent, superintendents can more easily get them to buy-in and follow along if he or she provided a forum where they can listen at the onset and throughout the decision-making process, constantly communicates the critical information to stakeholders. She said the following:

> [Redacted] communicated a lot and I felt like that even if I didn't agree with the direction like, "We're going to do this, and here is why we're going to do this, and these are the results we're hoping to see." And just kind of rallying the troops, "We are going to do this, I know you don't all agree, here's the information that you need and even though you don't agree I need you go with me anyway.

The principals interviewed associated the act of engaging in two-way communication with stakeholders to being collaborative. Specifically, they shared their views around collaborative goal setting and their experiences with this practice as a principal in the school district. Kate said the following:

> The collaborative goal setting…I feel like I've been in multiple situations where stakeholders, whether it be parents, teachers, sometimes depending on the district and who they serve, students, but are involved in really helping the superintendent get a pulse on what's important, what's not important and where those things are important.

Kelly also perceives the practice of communication as a two-way collaboration between the superintendent and diverse stakeholders, particularly, those working in schools. She said the following:

> Whether it be teachers, principals, people at various positions…he has to understand frustrations that they're feeling, like where they see challenges are because, at the end of the day, where he sees the challenges are as it relates to the day-to-day in the school, it's probably not all that accurate. He has to go down to the groundwork, to the ground level I think to figure out where the real challenges are, like what are the real pros in our district, what are the real strengths that maybe we're not totally capitalizing on? What are those opportunities and then what are those areas that we just have not done a good job with this at all.

Sarah described her experiences with communication around the goals and direction of the school district when the superintendent's practices around goal-setting are not collaborative in nature and his communication is not a two-way process or, as John described, a "broken

record." She said that in her experiences, due to the large size of the school district, she's often found herself wondering what the goals are for the district. Sarah said the following:

> I think being in such a large school district those pieces get lost. So as far as like goal setting, I can't sit here and tell you what's the goal for, specifically, for Reading. As a principal in a large urban school district I don't know how many principals know that the superintendent has clearly communicated, "These are the goals that we're going to achieve this particular school year." So if you keep those goals in front of you, you know where you're trying to go, but no one has ever communicated what the goal is going to be and how we are going to get there.

When asked to give an example, based on her experiences, Sarah immediately referred to the district's Literacy initiative. The goal of the elementary Literacy initiative is for all students to be reading at or above grade level by the 3rd grade, but beyond that, Sarah says the goals are not clear. She explained:

> They give us this reading initiative. It's like we're implementing literacy by three and literacy in the middle. Okay, but how do you measure that, and how are you getting at where you're trying to go?...You see the sign, you see it, but is it actually happening, and moving our school district …Where are we trying to go? Are we increasing by 2%? I think now that there's some number, but I promise you, I can't tell you what that is, which is really bad, I think, as a principal, but it's a number that we need to reach. I know my number that I need to reach for my campus, but as a district it's kind of lost.

Based on Lisa's experiences, school leaders lack a clear understanding of how their campus level goals roll up into the district's overall goals. This is another example of the disconnectedness that can exist between the schools and what is happening at the district level when working in the context of a large, urban school district.

Lisa could not definitively say rather or not superintendents she's worked under have engaged in collaborative goal setting or not. She could not remember a time where she heard of this type of collaborative or experienced it for her self, however, during the interviews Lisa made a point to say if collaborative goal setting is not happening in the large urban school district, it needs to be.

She explained the following:

> I think they need to sit with a team of instructional leaders, not just by themselves, and engage in conversations around what are the weaknesses of the district as a whole. Whether it's by a school, elementary or secondary, or by grade level or however detailed they want to get, but there should be conversations around what they think the initiative should be…The conversations around what are we going to do, they need to be directly involved in…I think that the curriculum department, multi-lingual department, or whatever departments, he needs to be sitting at a table where everybody is represented and they're having these conversations. I don't know that it doesn't happen. I don't know that it does happen. I just know that there has to be some input by the superintendent… Then, he has to listen to the feedback about what their ideas are and this is how we're going to attack this, and then be able to provide meaningful feedback to say yay or nay, and why yes or no.

Whereas the other principals emphasized their experiences with district stakeholders being involved in the goal-setting process and being the recipients of the superintendent's communications, Lisa stressed the importance of the superintendent being at the table to participate in the decision-making process around district goals. Her sense is that stakeholders, especially school principals, want to know what is important, what is a non-negotiable, to the superintendent and they look to the superintendent to provide the framework within which decisions can be made. Principal's experiences and perceptions concerning non-negotiable expectations set by the superintendent are described in the next section.

Sets non-negotiable expectations for student achievement and instruction. During the interviews, principals discussed another aspect of the messaging they frequently heard from their superintendents; the non-negotiable expectations for students achievement and instruction. In many instances, they shared they knew which expectations were optional and which ones were non-negotiable based on the systems and supports that were put into place. Kate explained the following:

> Non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction, I feel like I've seen that more in messaging and then, obviously, I think systems that are in place. So you can kind of tell what is flexible and what are those things that are non-negotiable that at a campus level that you're responsible for.

Kate gave two specific examples of the systems she is referring; the teacher appraisal system (TADS) and the supports provided for the implementation of Literacy by 3. In reference to TADS, she explained the following:

> The teacher appraisal system I think is one way of trying to bring us all on the same level as far as what we expect from teachers…with having a standard in a sense of this is where we want our teachers to be and I think that messages came across in the training and it comes across in lots of different ways. When you look at the rubric or when you're having conversations with teachers like you're coaching them from this point. So if you are a three, you're saying, "This is where we want all of our teachers to be in the district." So you know that even if they're coming to you and they're a one or they're barely a two, that's what you're coaching them to. If they're a solid three, then you need to coach them beyond that. So I think that there is definitely an effectiveness standard that's been set.

Teachers who work in the focus district of this study must have an overall score of a three in the TADS system to be considered an effective teacher while a four, the highest score a teacher can receive, is equated to being highly effective. One of the district priorities is to have an effective teacher in every classroom. This means all teachers are expected to score at a three or above on the TADS rubric.

Another non-negotiable expectation for student achievement described by Kate was that all students be reading at or above grade level by the third grade. This expectation is outlined in the goals for the district's Literacy by 3 initiative. As such, the non-negotiable expectation for instruction is that all schools implement the components of Literacy by 3. In her explanation of the non-negotiable expectations set around the Literacy by 3 initiative, Kate said the following:

> I feel like when we put literacy by three in place, that was a non-negotiable focus, we're going to put the money behind it, we're going to put the training behind it, we're going to put the personnel behind it and the resources behind it. So that was probably, I feel in my

> experience with the district, one of the first things that I've seen where I've thought, "all of the pieces are there." So if you're starting from scratch, you have all of the pieces there to make a good go of making this successful.

Lisa also perceived the goals set forth by the Literacy by 3 to represent a non-negotiable expectation for student achievement and instruction in the school district. She explained the following:

> I think in their [superintendents] own way they want to be strong instructional leaders where their decisions are around, "We need to push this, so kids are reading on grade level by the end of third grade." So the Literacy By 3 is a very concrete example. The whole big push was we're going to ensure kids are reading on grade level before they get to third grade because research shows that at the end of third grade, if they're not reading on grade level, this is what they do for the future. They plan for future students or grown ups who may be incarcerated.

John discussed his experience with a superintendent who emphasized safety and learning as a non-negotiable expectation for each campus. Simply put, all kids were expected to be learning and safe while doing so. He said the following:

> Well, back in the days under [redacted] there was a specific district description of what students would be…but the very first one was safety above all else and then it was learning. We're going to be safe and we're going to learn. I think [redacted] emphasized that heavily with we've going to engage kids. We're going to do something different than what we've been doing…I think that was a major focus for him.

John asserted the idea that a person can still walk into a school in the district and see a set focus on student engagement based on the non-negotiable expectations the superintendent communicated to school leaders, even though that particular superintendent is no longer in the district.

Kelly discussed her experiences with a superintendent who believed all principals needed to be instructional leaders and therefore, set the non-negotiable expectation in place that in order to be hired as a principal, potential candidates had to display a string knowledge around instructional leadership and have a track record for improving student learning outcomes. She described the following:

> I think that [redacted] push was to build strong instructional leaders and with the expectations set by him and the team, you had to be an instructional leader to get hired. You had to be. There was no other choice and if you were hired and they found out you were not because the data was showing something different…the SSOs were coming in, or back then SIOs were coming in, having conversations with principals. Back then it was more of a push. There were more conversations around instruction than what it used to be.

Regardless of what the expectation was, each principal described their experiences with superintendents who systematically exercised practices that sent messages to principals around what was important and non-negotiable around student achievement and instruction. Principals also discussed ways in which superintendents hire and manage experts to help them implement the systems around these non-negotiable expectations and whose expertise aligned to the

district's goals and priorities. Superintendent's practices around hiring and managing others are discussed in detail in the section below.

Hires and manages the experts. In the section on principal's perceptions of superintendent's knowledge, principals described in detail their experiences and perceptions of superintendents in large, urban school district who have relied on others to lead district initiatives, create plans on how to accomplish district goals and other important district functions. The "others" were described as being experts and some principals in the study even went as far as to say the superintendent's failure to rely on the experts around him or her could potentially lead to their failure as a superintendent. It was not surprising to find one of the themes for superintendent's practices that surfaced was about hiring and managing the experts. Sarah said based on her perceived work of the superintendent, they "hire people with the skill set that aligns to the goals." For example, if improving the district's reading scores was a goal, the superintendents surrounded themselves with experts in Literacy. If improving principal capacity in a certain area of leadership, such as cultural competency, was a goal, superintendents surrounded themselves with experts in developing school leader's cultural competency. John said the following:

> He [the superintendent] surrounds himself with people who know a lot more about a particular area than he does. He needs somebody who is absolute expert in that piece, and that's his go to person and he needs to go to them. He needs to hold them up as the expert and he needs to take their advice. He needs to listen.

In some ways, principals in the study attributed the practice of managing and delegating work to the experts to the size of the school district. Sarah said, "See, [redacted] is so big, and it's always

handed off to someone else to do that [manage the curriculum]. Somebody else manages this whole curriculum piece. Yes, the superintendent is aware of it but…that's for someone else to manage." They contemplated the idea that the superintendents have an abundance of areas to manage and too many problems to solve and issues to address to be as Lisa put it, "knee deep" in every aspect of the school district. However, even though principals perceive superintendents in large, urban school districts to be managers of others, they were clear that these experts are not completely operating based on their own intuitions about what needs to happen the school district, but rather based on the vision, goals and direction given to them by the superintendent. Kate explained the following:

> I think that they're the ones charged with the legwork. I think that the superintendent is setting a vision. Maybe talking about what the goals are, the expectations and then that person, whether it be the director or whomever, is then charged with making that happen. Like, what does that look like? Because, ultimately, when they bring it back to the superintendent, that superintendent is going to want to hear all the pros and cons. They're going to run it really because I think they're [the superintendents] depending on you to be their expert to bring them all the pros and cons of it, especially if you're asking for financial investment.

Regardless how much delegating actually happens, Lisa maintained that the actual practice of hiring the experts is critical to the work that schools engage in because the people that the superintendent hires, in her experiences, are the people who come out and work directly with the schools. She said the following:

> I think that we'll start with the hiring practices. Who is he hiring to be on his cabinet? Who is he hiring to go out to the schools to support? What does that look like? Who are those people? What's their background? What are their experiences because that is what's going to impact [schools] directly. Those are the people who are actually going to be coming out to the school.

Hiring experts to support schools is just one of the many supports provided to schools to assist them in meeting district goals. Aligning campus supports to district priorities is another practice superintendents engage in, as perceived by the principals in this study. This practice is discussed in detail in the section below.

Aligns campus supports to district priorities. When describing their perceptions and experiences with superintendent's practices, principals discussed ways in which superintendents aligned campus supports to district priorities. Supports included assigning district personnel to the campuses to support teachers, providing professional development around district priorities, allocating resources and district funds to support specific instructional programs intended to increase student academic achievement and allocating resources to improve school culture and climate. Sarah described her experiences with one superintendent who changed the structure of the entire district in order to provide a more streamlined way in which to support schools. She said the following:

> Well, I think one [practice] was shifting the campus support to align it more with what's happening as a whole in the district because what happened when I first became a principal, it's like we were all on different islands. It was like many school districts within a school district. So one superintendent came in, and he changed the structure and

> the reason for the structure change is to make sure that we all had the same focus as far as how we're going to support schools.

Mary emphasized professional development as a means of supporting schools with the implementation of district priorities. She discussed her experiences with professional development that was both purposeful and engaging. She said the following:

> I think those who work who have really strong curriculum and instruction departments and emphasize that, and those who also emphasize really strong professional development so that teachers just don't sit and get. When we had meetings, we didn't just sit and listen. We had groups where we discussed things. We should learn the same way that we want teachers to teach in the classroom.

While Kelly reiterated Mary's thoughts and perceptions around professional development, she highlighted the types of professional development teachers on the campus in a one on one or small group setting, rather than having to go somewhere else with a large group. She said, "I think the great thing superintendents do is make available what is necessary for everyone to become a good instructional leader. So the professional development is there. The assistance from the SSO is there. The TDS comes on campus." In this school district, a TDS (Teacher Development Specialist) is someone who comes to the school to assist in building teacher's capacity around pedagogy, data and classroom culture through instructional planning, one on one coaching and modeling of instructional best practices in the classroom as well as other forms of professional development and support. They are assigned to work with teachers in specific content areas such as Reading, Math and Science and are viewed as experts in those specific content areas. Kelly asserted the idea that TDS not only help teacher get better, but also

principals who may not be experts in certain content areas or areas of practice. She said the following:

> They go in and they help the teachers to develop themselves, but they also help the principals to become better because there is that open line of communication between the principal, the teacher, and the TDS. If the teacher doesn't know and the principal doesn't know, then they can both learn from the Teacher Development Specialist what they should be doing for a particular subject. Sometimes principals are good with instruction, but not any particular subject. So, the TDS implementation helps strengthen both the teacher and the principal of what Biology should look like, for example, what US history should look like, not just what English, which may be your background, should look like.

Kelly said the TDS position was created as a layer of support aligned to the superintendent's priority; ensuring individuals on campus leadership teams were equipped to be instructional leaders. The position was formed in response to "the lack of knowledge of the teachers and the administrators on campus." When it came to decisions around which schools were assigned a TDS, Kelly said at first it was the "majority of the schools, but at some point, schools that were high performing no longer got a TDS."

Kelly also described her experiences with a superintendent who prioritized the need for all campuses to have to staff reflective of the students being served on the campus and a highly qualified staff, meaning teachers held the appropriate certifications and endorsements for the grade levels and subjects being taught. She said the following:

> It became about the personnel….He wanted to know if you had the right people on your campus. For example, if you had Hispanic students, did you have representation on your staff for those kids? If you had African-American kids, did you have representation on your staff for those kids? Not only so that the kids feel comfortable, but so that the parents also feel comfortable coming in and having conversations with people on the campus…Then, the personnel part became on how qualified are the people, not just what ethnicity are they, but how qualified are they and do you have the right people on campus, doing the right thing, at the right time.

Kelly described the time, funding, and resources the superintendent put towards supporting campuses round this priority by doing things such as hosting job fairs for campuses throughout the school year, awarding campuses for being 100% staffed by a certain date in the summer, providing incentives for teachers to serve at high needs campuses, proving professional development in the area of cultural competency, expanding the human resources department and early recruitment efforts to secure the best teachers.

Lisa reflected on Apollo, a Math program introduced in the school district by a former superintendent. The program's goal was to increase the number of students who were successful on the state Math exam. The program was housed in schools that historically struggled academically in the area of Math and utilized small group interventions as the primary mode of support. In total, the program cost the district approximately $61 to implement over the course of several years. She said the following:

> Is the superintendent responsible for bringing Apollo? Yeah, he pushed it. He allotted money to it. He's the one that said, "I want all this money here. I am going to take it from

here, and I'm going to give it here. That's him. He's directly responsible for breathing life into Apollo.

Mary shared that sometimes the priority was not necessarily around instruction in the traditional sense, but that the superintendents in her experiences also saw the need to focus on having positive school culture and climates. As such, she described one superintendent who, in his first year on the job, spent a great deal of time and allocated resources towards supporting campus in the improvement of the culture and climate. She described the following:

> This superintendent was interested in what each campus looked like when you walked onto it? Do you have a big wrought iron fence around your campus that is not welcoming to the kids and is not welcoming to the parents? So his view was so much broader that it stood out a lot because when we talk about the socio-emotional and all that kind of stuff…he touched on how kids felt when they came to your school…There were changes made. If you had a wrought iron gate directly next to your campus…in front of your door…he [the superintendent] had somebody come out and remove that. Do you have, just the welcoming piece, the climate and the culture? He would also do surveys where the district would call your school just to see how the phone was answered or how long a guest had to wait when they came into the building. He also talked about who is the parking for in front of the school and rather or not it was for guests and visitors or is it for the principal, the teachers and the five assistant principals. He emphasized it needed to be about kids and community, not about the people that work there and not about wrought iron gates keeping everybody out.

Mary described this superintendent's practices around instruction as being "taken to a whole other level." He was concerned about the experiences students and parents were having before the students even made it to the classroom, before they even made it to the school's front doors. As such, one of his practices was to align resources and funding to his focus on school culture and climate. According to Mary, as a result of this alignment, school leaders and front office staffs were given ongoing customer service training, annual surveys were administered to collect data around how safe parents and students thought their school was and funding was set aside to update the school facilities. However, in principal's experiences, superintendents do not provide supports without an expectation for implementation. These expectations are monitored closely throughout the course of the school year, a practice discussed in the section below.

Monitors expectations for instruction. During the interviews, principals explained the superintendent's practices as related to monitoring expectations for instruction. To put it simply, Sarah said, "they [superintendents] set goals, plan, implement the plan or have people around them to implement the plan and then they actually go see if it's happening." When superintendents "go see if it's happening", most often this is by means of conducting school visits. John described how superintendents visit classrooms alongside the principal to gather "snapshots in time" that informs him or her as to rather or not students in that particular school are being successful. John discussed the slow move away from solely looking at test scores to determine rather or not a school is being successful to a focus on other schooling factors and subjective information that can be learned as a result of actually visiting the school. He said the following:

> Well, most commonly in the district has been looking at test scores…dropout rates, state indicators… I think that we're probably going back to realization that we once had that it's not just about test scores, that there's more to a kid than a test score. So I see us, at least in the discussion standpoint, of reducing the emphasis solely on testing and looking at other indicators, like community engagement and do have strong fine arts programs? Do we have strong athletics or extracurricular programs in our comprehensive schools? So I think that, again, what I think of a superintendent monitoring the district is a combination of data, but it's also combined with the subjective side. Is the superintendent getting out and looking around?

Sarah stressed the important of visiting schools as she reflected on her experiences with a superintendent who never visited schools. She said the following;

> It's like, you get a superintendent who never, ever makes it to a school…How do you never, ever make it to a school in a large, urban school district that' struggling instructionally in the classroom? How is that possible? That person doesn't have the right focus. I mean, it doesn't have to be all the time, but you need to see those practices, You've got to be saying, this is what should be happening and this is what is really happening.

During the interviews, Kelly described her experiences with the feedback superintendents gave principals as a result of his school visits and how school visits influenced the superintendent's expectations around what should be happening instructionally on a campus. She said the following:

> He [the superintendent] would give examples of campuses they went to and what they saw. So you did know, as the district, that they were visiting some campuses. And when there was something good they would say that, and when there was something not so good going on, they would say that…superintendent two would say, "I went to campus so-and-so, and this is what I saw. I really enjoyed that there was teachers here that were rocking and rolling, they had kids engaged. That's when the huge part about engagement came out for HISD... Not only are the teachers teaching, but what are the students doing? Is there engagement going on? Are they focused? Are they interactive? …So he would often do walkthroughs and see kids sleeping, and that would be an issue for him because if you're sleeping you can't be engaged in the work.

In Kelly's example, school visits became not only a way for the superintendent to monitor the implementation of the instructional expectations in schools, but also a way of assessing what else was needed to improve the schooling experience and learning outcomes for students.

Principals in this study described multiple other ways superintendents engaged in the practice of monitoring instructional expectations, one of which included conducting curriculum audits. A curriculum audit is conducting to ensure the curriculum resources schools are expected to use are aligned to the state's student learning expectations. Mary gave an example based on her experiences with a new superintendent. She described the following:

> So the superintendent wasn't really clear about the curriculum that was developed was what students need to be learning. So he brought in an individual to do an audit of the curriculum to see if what we're doing in our school district is aligned to what should be happening in the state at the right levels. So that was a huge start for a new

> superintendent to come in and first start with that component to assure that the documents that were created by our school district are aligned with what students should be learning. So that was a priority for that superintendent to assure that whatever we're producing for students to learn, I want to make sure that that information is the right information.

According to the principals in this study, another way superintendents engaged in the practice of monitoring instructional expectations was by looking at teacher practices. Lisa provided an example of a superintendent who wanted a way to more accurately measure teacher growth and performance in the classroom. According to Lisa, the teacher appraisal system at the time did not provide an effective means of monitoring teacher's progress towards the goals that had been set for this particular superintendent, so he changed the system to more closely align with his desired outcomes. Lisa explained the following:

> Even the new appraisal system was aligned to that by not allowing teachers to be on MPDAS (Modified Professional Development and Appraisal System), where in the old days if you were on MPDAS and you liked your score, we only went in…three times or two times in the year for 10 minutes. That was it, because your scores carried over. So every year you just signed that you want the same scores as last year…as three years ago. I want the same score and you could have the same scores from 20 years ago on MPDAS. So we never had to go into those teacher's classrooms. The appraisal system is a concrete piece of the monitoring piece. How are we going to monitor that teachers are truly doing what we are asking them to do?...now, there are no MPDAS. 20-year veterans, one year…you all are going to be held accountable to the same rubric.

Sarah argued that in her experiences, the monitoring practices of a superintendent are the most important. She explained the following:

> I think you have to see all of it to make sure that it all goes together. You can sit, and you can set the goals, but if you never get into the reality of the work to see if it's actually happening, that's a missing component. I mean, you have to have a little bit on the planning so you know that they're heading in the right direction because they can head in the direction that you know nothing about. They can tell you where they're heading, but as the superintendent I think you need to know, yes, we set these goals, this is how we're going to get there and then, let me go see if those practices are actually happening in the school.

Sarah emphasized the need for superintendents to not just trust, but to actually get out into school and verify that what they want to be happening is actually happening.

This section explained the themes among participant's experience with superintendent's instructional leadership practices. Five themes were explained, which included the following: communication and collaborative goal setting; sets non-negotiable expectations for student achievement and instruction; hires and manages the experts; aligns campus supports to district priorities; and monitors expectations for instruction. The next section explains how participant's described the impact of superintendent's beliefs, knowledge, and practices on student achievement outcomes.

Impact on Student Achievement Outcomes

According to the participants, having a direct impact on student's academic outcomes can only be achieved through working directly with students in the classroom. In other words, they

argued teachers directly impact student achievement outcomes, not principals or superintendents. Kate explained the following:

> That's a tough one. I don't know. I kind of tend to think that all of their impact is indirect, because they're so far removed. I think ultimately their [superintendents] impacting others, and that's just moving down. So, I guess I see that as indirect in the sense that, probably the most direct impact is going to be the classroom teacher, and I think above the classroom teacher the most direct impact is going to be the principal and then you have those layers, I mean that just kind of flow through the system.

The layers Kate referenced are a direct result of the organizational structure in large, urban school district. In the district of study, principals supervise teachers and principals are supervised by School Support Officers (SSO) who are supervised by Chief School Officers (CSO). The Chief School Officers report to the Deputy Superintendent who in turn reports to the Superintendent. As such, there are five layers of positions between students and the superintendent. It is because of these layers that Sarah perceives the impact of the superintendent on student achievement outcomes to be indirect. She said the following:

> You never hear from the messenger. I think that's the hardest piece. You always get messages from different people not directly in line with the superintendent but in line with a person that reports to the superintendent, and it trickles down. Its just so many different layers from the superintendent to the principals that a lot of times the messaging will get lost. Its not communicated the same way. It's a disconnect. You don't really feel connected to the message that comes from the superintendent because you're getting the message from someone else and its kind of watered down by the time it gets to you.

Lisa's message on the topic of whether or not the superintendent's impact was direct or indirect was really simple: if you're not directly connected to kids, your impact, if any is indirect. She said the following:

> You're not going to be able to tie a string from the superintendent to one of my kids here. There's no way. It's got to fall through from him to the cabinet to the chief to the director to the SSO to the principal…no, I don't believe there's a direct impact on student achievement.

Each of the principals in the study expressed the same ideas as to why they believe the superintendent's impact on student achievement outcomes is indirect, but each also shared that there is indeed an impact. During the interviews, principals shared various examples and thoughts regarding the indirect impact they perceive superintendents to have on student academic achievement. As a result of the data analysis, three themes were created to describe the superintendent's impact on student achievement outcomes. The themes are as follows: beliefs focus on instruction; practices around systems of support; and the superintendent's knowledge and decision-making practices. The section below explains each of the three themes in detail.

Beliefs focus on instruction. When asked about how superintendent's beliefs, knowledge, and practices impact student academic outcomes in a large, urban school district, the principals in this study discussed the idea that beliefs drive decision-making practices. Specifically, they described their experiences with superintendents who believed they were the instructional leader for the district and who held a belief around instruction being at the core of their work. Principals shared that because of these beliefs, superintendents focused on improving instruction in their decision-making practices. Sarah explained the following:

> I believe that it [superintendent's belief] does have an impact on student outcomes. With the various superintendents that I have worked for, I've noticed that some have stronger beliefs than others on the instructional component. The ones that really focus on the instructional component and believe that it's a critical piece, all of their work is surrounded around the instructional component and that's what they're pushing across levels, across schools, and the message is consistent, and that's all we talk about. That's the focus of the work when you have the superintendent who truly believes that the instructional piece is the core of schools.

In Mary's experiences, she has looked to the superintendent to provide the direction for the district as it relates to instruction. She listens for the same messages referenced by Sarah as it relates to the superintendent's beliefs as expressed through his or her expectations for instruction and student learning. Mary described one such example of how the superintendent's beliefs around instruction directly impacted the practices she was engaging in on her campus, which in turn had an indirect impact on student academic achievement outcomes. The specific practice Mary described was directly connected to the superintendent's belief that all high school students should be enrolled in dual credit or advanced placement courses because exposure to more rigorous coursework would better prepare students for college. As a result of hearing the superintendent repeatedly share his beliefs on this specific issue, Mary explained the following:

> Our default position now for kids coming into school is that you're going to take our most rigorous pathway. You have to defend to us why you shouldn't do that. So the biggest arguments we've had is kids not wanting to do that or not thinking they can do that. So the superintendent has significant impact on the school district with statements…about

> what they message instructionally, that these kids can do that, that they can do more than we think they can do. It's up to us to challenge them. It's up to us to find ways to get them past these obstacles. It's up to us to set that…There's a impact, but it's not as immediate. In other words, the impact may happen a year down the road, whereas a teacher's belief about that with a class can be much more immediate, because that teacher is dealing with that kid. From the superintendent, it's got to come down through the layers down to me for me to communicate to a teacher. So it may take a little more time for that process to happen. All the more reason that the superintendent has to be consistent.

John's example showed how a superintendent's focus on instruction and beliefs around student's being able to be pushed to higher levels provides an example of how superintendents can positively impact student academic achievement outcomes, albeit, indirect and delayed. Kate described the need for the superintendent to focus on instruction as being so critical, she says when that focus on instruction does not exist at the superintendent level, it trickles down to the school level and ultimately has a negative impact on student academic achievement outcomes. She said the following:

> So I think that when …there's a culture of being well versed in instructional practices and what's happening in the classroom, I think that just trickles down to the classroom. But I mean, if you have that superintendent who seems to care less about instruction or maybe …they're not necessarily communicating that and that's not going down to the principal level, to the school level. I think it can negatively impact student achievement because that's [instruction] not the focus and I think ultimately when you're in a district

> where you know, regardless of anything, the focus is student achievement, it just trickles down to the campus, trickles down to the classroom.

Kate and John shared some of the same thoughts as it relates to the superintendent focus on instruction and how it impacts student achievement outcomes, indirectly and over a period of time. John described the impact as being "definite" and compared the manner in which a superintendent steers a large school district to how a captain steers a large ship. He described the following:

> Well, it's [the superintendent's impact] pretty significant. Now, again, there's a lag time and a change, and … it's kind of like turning the Queen Mary, the ocean liner the Queen Mary. The Queen Mary will turn, but she's not a speedboat, okay? But once you set the rudder in motion, also, once you've started the turn, it's not going to snap back the other way either. You can turn the rudder all the way back, and it's going to take a while for there to be a reaction. But that's kind of the way superintendents are with…it's the best analogy I can think of, steering a big organization. It has a very definite impact, the superintendent setting the stage, talking about high-quality instruction, talking about student engagement, talking about those expectations.

It is because of this slow turn that occurs in a large organization such as the district at the center of this study, this trickle down effect Kate described in thinking about the many layers the superintendent's decisions go through before reaching the campus level, that Kelly says she grapples with when reflecting on the effects of inconsistent practices on student achievement outcomes. In Kelly's experiences, it hasn't been the superintendent's belief and focus on instruction alone that impacts student academic achievement outcomes, but a sustained focus on

instructional leadership. She described her struggles with a constant change in the instructional practices being passed down to the schools from the district level and how the inconsistencies don't provide principals with the necessary time and opportunity to find out what really works in improving student's academic achievement outcomes. She explained the following:

> Well, the only thing that I've experienced in the past is there's no consistency. It's like the practices continue to change and don't allow for anything to see if the practice really works instructionally on the campus. So how do you know if what was implemented is effective if it's only going to be around for two years or it's going to go away in three years? And if it's something that working instructionally, why doesn't it remain? Because since I've been a principal, I've heard so many different practices for different content areas, for different instructional components…how do you know what's working if it's constantly changing, and not allowing any time for anything to work because it's been different all the time.

To use John's analogy, Kelly was describing how often "the ship" changed its course before a new turn was fully complete.

According to the principals in this study, when superintendents have a strong belief that instruction is the driving force that produces positive student achievement outcomes and in turn create district cultures focused on instruction, they are able to impact the work happening in schools and eventually, in classrooms. The principals in this study described this impact as being indirect and delayed due to the "trickle down" nature inherent in the organizational structure of a large school district, but nevertheless, the principals said the superintendent does have a "definite impact."

Practices around systems of support. Focusing on instruction alone does not have an impact on student academic achievement outcomes, according to the principals in this study. The participants discussed the need for superintendents to create systems of support aligned to their instructional beliefs and expectations in order to effectively impact student academic achievement outcomes. Kate explained the following:

> Well, I think that messages can fade without connectors…A superintendent can all day talk about learning for all, and we want to make sure our Special Ed students achieve, we want to make sure all these different students achieve, but if you don't see the connections or if he's not building on that with the systems in place then that's not going to trickle down to the school.

Some examples of the systems Kate is referring to connects back to principal's perceptions of superintendent's practices. They include ways in which superintendents allocate funding to support schools and utilize human resources within the district to support schools. As it relates to the superintendent's impact on student academic achievement outcomes and how superintendents utilize the human resources within the district, Sarah said the following:

> That's hard because it's how they structure their team and provide support coming from the superintendent would be the determining factor if they [the superintendent's practices] has any impact at all, right? So how they utilize kind of the human capital within the district to support schools is impactful.

In alignment with Sarah's thought around the superintendent's utilization of the district's human resource's, Kelly described ways in which the superintendent's practices around the allocation of

human resources can have a positive or negative impact on student achievement outcomes. She explained the following:

> I think it impacts achievement based on the individuals that that superintendent hires to work with the schools because I think that those people have more direct impact on the instruction or the improvement than the superintendent himself or herself does. But if you gather around you really caring, good strong instructional leaders, then that makes a positive impact. But if you promote people just because they're a certain race or they're a certain-- certain board members want them or for the wrong reasons, they don't have what they need to really change things, then it has a negative impact on it.

Mary argued when superintendents truly believe in the success of all students, struggling schools should be provided with the necessary resources and supports to provide high quality instruction and intervention to their students. For her, this might come in the form of personnel, funding, programs or other resources but regardless of type of support needed, she said struggling schools should not have to fight to get what they need. She said the following:

> I think that it has a great impact on it [student academic achievement outcomes] if they really believe in the kids' learning…But if we want to just look good, that's not enough. We need to make it good, and that's what I would want a superintendent to do, is to make it good …and create an environment where people feel supportive that they're doing the right things and that they don't have to just fight for everything you get. Like at this school, I've had to fight for everything we would get because it was a throw-away school, and it's a minority school. So I think you shouldn't have to fight. I think they should willingly give to those who need it the most.

Mary's thoughts connected to the earlier section on principal's perceptions of superintendent's beliefs and the ways in which superintendents could align their beliefs to their actions. Regardless of the different resources the superintendent can put in place to create support systems for schools, Lisa's perceived the superintendent's impact as being indirect because "he's not on my campus providing me support day in and day out or once a month in person…he's 30,000 feet up above."

The superintendent's knowledge and decision-making practices. The amount of knowledge superintendents have when making decisions about how they will support schools, what programs and initiatives the district will embark upon, the policies that will be presented to the school board and other areas related to instruction also have an impact of student academic achievement outcomes, according to the effective principals in this study. According to Kate, it is the decision-making practices aligned to the beliefs systems of superintendents that have the greater impact on students academic achievement outcomes, not necessarily the knowledge superintendent possess. She explained the following:

> Well, I mean at the end of the day, it's action oriented. I can say I believe all kids should learn or grow at the highest level. I can have deep knowledge about it, but … it's just like data, you can have all of that information, but if you do nothing with it, if you don't act on it, then … you're not really putting anything in place. So you're not going to see that trickle down, I don't think to your students. So I think that superintendents that are, whether they have broad knowledge or not, or deep knowledge or not, if they are able to surround themselves with the right people, know enough to be dangerous, and act on

> decisions in a timely manner, then I think they have a better chance of impacting students.

John also discussed the superintendent's knowledge as it relates to decision making however, he discussed it from the lens of how a superintendent's knowledge, or lack thereof, can have a negative impact on student achievement outcomes. John's argued that when superintendents lack the necessary knowledge to make sound decisions around instruction, their decision-making has a negative impact on student achievement outcomes. John provided an example:

> If I am sitting with the superintendent and he comments, "what's a scope and sequence?" or "why would that be important?" Now, we'll probably have a negative impact, because…the superintendent may not know all of the ins and outs of setting a scope and sequence or even what all that test's about, but the understanding that there is a relationship between scope and sequence and assessment and that we are doing something positive to try to align that, for the superintendent to get that, that's very important…So you want to know that a superintendent has enough instructional knowledge to make decisions.

Sarah and Lisa acknowledged the superintendent's decision making and the potential impact those decisions can have on a student academic achievement outcomes, however, both principals continued to lean on their perceptions that the impact is indirect. Particularly, as it relates to the superintendent's knowledge and the decisions he makes, both principals argued the principals, and how they relay the information to their staff and implement those decisions on their campuses, has more of a direct impact on student achievement outcomes than the superintendent. Sarah explained the following:

> It just really depends…because it's like a second message. So directly, yes, it impacts the principal that's leading that particular school, but does it really change the instructional practices on the campus? It just really depends on how the leader takes the information and applies it…As it relates to the students, that's indirect.

Lisa described a process wherein the superintendent's decisions come through her and, from there, she decides what to do with them. She rationalized it as being an issue of time, change, and the principal's responsibility to meet the needs of the students on campus regardless of what is going on higher up at the district level. She explained the following:

> The decisions he's making up there that have to funnel down to me, that's how he impacts. I still believe that the leader on the campus will do what they need to do with those programs to make it work or not work…Maybe I'll never have the opportunity to sit with the superintendent at any point in time, ever in my career. I don't care because at the end of the day I'm not going to let what's going on up here interfere with the work we do here. It cannot. These kids don't have time for them to get themselves together or they don't have time for me to say "I have to understand their vision before I move." They don't have time for that.

Lisa's response based on her perceptions displayed a sense of urgency she says is necessary to be successful in doing the work required in a large, urban school district.

This section explained the themes among participant's perceptions of the impact of superintendent's beliefs, knowledge, and practices on student achievement. Three themes were discussed, which included the following: beliefs focus on instruction; practices around systems of support; and the superintendent's knowledge decision-making practices. The next section

explains how participant's described the influence of superintendent's beliefs, knowledge, and practices on their own beliefs, knowledge, and practices.

Superintendent's influence on effective principals beliefs, knowledge, and practices

This section details the themes of the participant's perceptions of the influence of superintendent's beliefs, knowledge, and practices on their own beliefs, knowledge, and practices. The data analysis yielded four themes used to describe the impact of these areas on student achievement outcomes. The themes are as follows: aligned beliefs; examples of what not to do; influence in the formative years; and other influences. The section below explains each of the four themes in detail.

Aligned beliefs. One of the themes that surfaced during the data analysis process was the idea that when principals felt as though their personal beliefs aligned with the beliefs of the superintendent, principals were more enthusiastic about implementing the superintendent's vision and expectations on their campus. The effective principals in this study described their willingness to follow a superintendent whose belief system was parallel to their own leading to a change in leadership practices at the school level. Kelly explained the following:

> I think for me it's been more a process of an alignment of beliefs…I think the bottom line of what I saw superintendents do early was never forget what this business was all about. It was all about helping the kid attain something that they didn't have and for a lot of them didn't think they could have. The whole purpose of public education…I've watched superintendents always go after kids who really needed that. That doesn't mean they abandon kids who have other opportunities and advantages. You build a good school, you build a highly interactive and engaging school, it floats all boats wherever a kid may be

> on the spectrum. This is where we agree. I think that's important for superintendents to communicate, and in the school business, I think more often than not, we have common interests and we have common beliefs. For me, I look for where does that align.

Mary and Lisa each provided examples around how their practices at the campus level have changed based on where they saw their belief systems aligning with what the superintendent was communicating. As such, they described instances when the superintendent's beliefs influenced their practices because they saw where their beliefs were parallel to one another.

Lisa recalled a meeting she'd had with her superintendent after the results from the state proficiency exam had come back. In her description, Lisa shared the superintendent's dissatisfaction with the Reading scores throughout the district and his belief that I order to be successful in school and beyond, students needed to be proficient readers at the least. Lisa's story provided a clear example of how the superintendent's belief around student's success in reading influenced her decision to double block reading classes for struggling students on her campus. She described the following:

> I double blocked the reading block for one particular third grade classroom and they were the lowest performing group. And I had a phenomenal teacher, who had just moved to third grade, and we taught reading until 1 o'clock in the afternoon. We embedded science and social studies to there, so we took double grades, the grade counted for science and it counted for reading. We did not teach science in isolation, and we did not teach social studies in isolation. We only taught two subjects, math and reading, and that was it. I think all but one student failed that back then, the Star test. We needed them to be successful, but the only way to do it was to double block it. If they can't read, then they

need reading time. And if they need more reading time than the regular students, so we need to double block it. So the belief that the kids should've been successful …and that was just the belief of, "If they can't read, why are you teaching anything else?" He used to say in the meetings, "Why are we teaching anything else and so what I did was I took that message on my own, I didn't ask anybody, I just did it at an elementary level…These kids can't read. They'll never be successful if they can't read.

Mary described what happened when a superintendent discussed his beliefs around ineffective teachers in a principal's meeting and how that influenced her to immediately take action when she encountered an ineffective teacher on her campus. She said the following:

> There was another belief of ineffective teachers are going to kill us. Ineffective teachers you've got to get rid of them. Ineffective teachers we don't have time for them. So that regime, we were in there with a steel fist basically…I remember that Sam had come to my campus and it was the second day of school, and he showed up there and within two-day, well, one day I knew, the first day of school I had hired this fifth grade teacher, and I was in there her first day and I visit all the classrooms on the first day, and I knew she wasn't going to make it. There was no way she was going to make it. I saw her for a few minutes on the first day of school. I sent him an email by the third day of class. That day I sent him an email, I moved her to second grade and …on the third-day of school, we were already moving her and moving another teacher to third grade, and that teacher to fifth grade…people were upset. They weren't happy, but I knew on the first day she wasn't going to make it. I'm not going to wait. I didn't wait for an okay. I didn't ask anybody.

John also looked for areas where his beliefs aligned with what was being messaged by the superintendent saying it “makes him excited about the work ahead” when he can identify areas in which he and the superintendent agree. Nevertheless, John also recalled his experiences with a superintendent who expressed beliefs that did not align with his own. He described his process of analysis when this happens and how he decides what he’s going to do next. John explained the following:

> In places where it does not align, then I have to ask the question, "To what degree is that something that's unethical, immoral, or illegal?" If it's unethical, immoral, or illegal, I'm not going to do that, and so, therefore, I've got to communicate that to the superintendent that I'm working for. If it's none of those things, and it is some other direction, I think it's important for the superintendent to communicate, "This is important to where I want to go.” Now then that becomes my responsibility to line up with that, even if it's a direction that, at first, I don't think is the best direction. If it's not illegal, immoral, or unethical, then I need to go that way.

Nevertheless, like other principals in the study, later in the interviews John did make a point to say when the superintendent’s beliefs align with his own, it does add a level of excitement around the work that needs to be done for kids. He said when he and the superintendent’s beliefs align, the superintendent is going to see “his best work.” He concluded, “I’m better and you’re going to get that when I see more alignment, that we’re all going in a common direction.”

Other principals in the study were not always as agreeable as John was in describing how the superintendent influences their own beliefs, knowledge, and practices at this stage in their careers. They did, however, share their thoughts on the superintendent’s influence on their

beliefs, knowledge, and practices in the earlier stages of their careers. Those experiences are detailed below.

Influence in the formative years. Kate compared being a new principal to being a new teacher and the need to have a clear sense of direction and structure to follow as a way of describing the superintendent's influence on her beliefs, knowledge, and practices in her more formative years. Although she could not identify any ways in which superintendents have influenced her during the more recent years of her career as a school leader, she did feel like the superintendent's influence was probably more evident, particularly in her practices, during her formative years as a school leader. She explained the following:

> I think especially if you're a new leader, when you're a new leader you're no different than being a new teacher. You look for direction. You look for structure. You look for systems because you don't know what you don't know and you're like hanging onto everything for dear life.

Sarah's response to the question around the superintendent's influence were similar to Kate's in that she felt as though the superintendent had a more meaningful impact on her during her formative years as an educator, except or Sarah, her memory of the superintendent's influence dated back to her years as a teacher. She discussed one superintendent in particular who believed reading was the key that unlocked the door for every child. During this superintendent's tenure, Sarah was still a teacher in the classroom, but she talked about how this superintendent's beliefs regarding reading and the way he messaged it and put it into practice through creating systems of supports for schools helped groom her belief system as a school leader later on in her career. She described the following:

> That's the perfect example because I was a classroom teacher when the whole initiative came into play…they provided so many resources to teach you how to teach kids how to read, which was very beneficial to me as a teacher…My kids were excelling so my principal selected me to be like the campus trainer…Then after campus trainer I was selected to be one of the reading teacher trainers, which supported schools at that particular time…I truly believed what the superintendent said was right, "Support these schools. Provide the principals with the necessary resources, and these schools are going to be successful." I think I was on the east side of town, which wasn't like the high academic achieving areas, but after that couple years of implementation we were like the number one in reading in that particular area…I got the principals to believe about reading, which the superintendent started with me when I was in the classroom…and that belief system just kind of trickles down to all the other components until those principals in those schools believed the same thing so they allowed me to support their teachers with those practices and they were able to see how it impacted [student achievement].

Mary also described how at this point in her career, she is driven by her own belief system and what she believes to be best for kids rather than being driven by anything the superintendent does or thinks. She said the following:

> What I will say is my beliefs are solidified. I want to think about kids, but when the new superintendent comes in and I see alignment between what I think about kids and what he believes as the superintendent, you kind of light up. There can be times when you're saying, "Okay, we're going to survive this. We're going to do what's right for kids and I'm going to protect my campus from outside influences. I'm going to continue to do

> what's the right thing to do, and I'm going to in defense mode." When I perceive that alignment to be there, that we see things the same way, then I'm going to be much more public, I'm going to be much easier with my approach to making decisions and doing things that need to be done to push the envelope because at this point in my career, I'm probably going to do that anyway, because I've been doing it a long time.

Mary described being grounded in her own belief system, although like John described earlier, she does find a sense of excitement when she feels the superintendent's beliefs align with her own. She went on to discuss how she does not fear losing her job as a result of being too vocal about her beliefs. She said, "no effective principal should be."

When it came to practices in particular, the principals in this study were more apt to share examples of how superintendents in their experiences have influenced them more so by demonstrating what not to do, rather than what they should be doing. Examples of each principal's explanation of what not to do are described below.

Examples of what not to do. An interesting finding in the data analysis was the perceptions participants shared regarding what not to do, as it relates to the superintendent's beliefs and practices in particular, rather than sharing examples of positive influences superintendents in their experiences have provided. The principals in the study provided several examples of when the superintendent's practices and/or beliefs did not align with what the principals perceived to represent effective instructional leadership and in some ways, cautioned superintendents from engaging in these practices and holding these beliefs because of the negative effects the principals perceived both had at the district and school levels. One such example centered on Sarah's recollection of a superintendent who, over the course of several

principal's meetings, provided principals with directions regarding how ineffective teachers should be addressed. The superintendent, as Sarah shared, simply thought those teachers should be removed. Sarah, however, did not think it was that simple and saw this practice as an example of what not to do. She explained the following:

> Well previously, our superintendent believed if a teacher is ineffective in the classroom, they need to be removed. I believe that if a teacher has passion, and they're struggling with instructional implementation I can support them because you can't teach passion. If someone comes to the door, and they're passionate about teaching kids, you can improve their instructional practice. It's just a matter of how you're going to get them to improve in the way that they need to be able to impact student achievement. I just don't believe in pushing teachers out the door if you believe that a number says that they're ineffective because there's a reason why that teacher is struggling if they have passion. If they're not passionate about their work, yes, "this is not the right fit for you. You need to move on", but there's other barriers that teachers face. There are some other support pieces that the school needs to provide in order for that teacher to be effective. So that was one area where I'm, "Hmm. I don't think we should fire every teacher."

While Sarah's example centered on ineffective teachers and her belief in coaching and supporting those who demonstrate a passion for teaching, Kate's example focused on valuing the effective people around you and promoting teamwork. She shared her belief in the importance of having a positive mindset while operating with a sense of urgency and that you can do both while maintaining a positive culture and climate. Kate feels as though her belief, however, is in

stark contrast to the practices she has experienced superintendents engage in within her current school district. She explained the following:

> So I think in this district, I think probably what influenced me from the superintendent was more about what I didn't want to be like, or what I didn't want my environment on my campus to be like…Why is there this tension in the room kind of thing? …What you realize is that you have to shield your campus from that and it is your job also to not, I guess, promote negativity about the superintendent because that's going to be happening anyway and it doesn't help with what needs to happen in your school. It doesn't create a positive mindset. That's kind of what I think I got from our last superintendent of yes, there's a job to get done. Yes, there is major urgency in getting the job, done but you still have to depend on all of these people around you to actually do the job. As a principal, you realize I am very dependent on classroom teachers who live it every day to get the job done. It's not going to do me any good, them any good, the kids any good, beating up on them with this urgency of getting it done. You can have the urgency. You can work really hard and still, I think, be in an environment where, okay, we're in this together. We're going to get it done.

Kate expressed her thoughts around the influence superintendents have on the school district's overall culture and climate. She cautioned that when it is not positive "it makes effective principals want to leave."

Mary and Kelly had similar examples of what not to do as related to superintendent's practices that are not viewed as influential to principals. Both focused on how superintendents use data and communicate messages about data. Mary discussed her belief that superintendent

really need to take the time to get to know schools in a more intimate way that extends beyond analyzing the data. She argued there are things the numbers simply cannot tell you about a school and promoted the practice of superintendents conducting school visits to "get a pulse" on what's actually happening on each campus. She explained:

> Most of the superintendents spend a majority of the time looking at the data and the data really doesn't give you the true sense of what's actually going on at a campus. There's usually more to it than that... There's some culturally components. There could be some leadership interference. It could be just the whole delivery of the components. It feels like you don't have any support. You're working for individuals that don't take the time to even get to know leaders that are leading the schools. It's like, "we're working here." You could take a minute to come and see the work. If it's just occasionally, it's okay, but I think it's important that the superintendent, if you're leading schools, that you have a pulse. You don't have to know the details, but you know what's going on in schools versus just looking at the number.

Sarah says her experiences and frustrations with superintendents who only know her by her numbers has helped her keep the relationship she builds with her teachers at the forefront her practices. Instead of just looking at their test scores she says she goes above and beyond the district mandate for conducting teacher observations to be sure she knows what is going on in the classroom.

Kelly discussed her experiences with superintendents who focus heavily on test scores saying, "It creates stressors that lead to an unhealthy culture." While she shared her understanding regarding the basic notion that students need to pass the test for state

accountability purposes, like Sarah, Kelly feels there are other factors for superintendents to consider. She explained the following:

> So one thing, and sometimes I vacillate between whether this is negative or not, the second superintendent put a lot of emphasis on testing and test scores… you never want to be the type of leader that talks about tests all the time with your staff because you know that there's so much more to the kid than just a test…the whole child…You're always looking through the lens of how well a kid going to perform on a test based on what a teacher is doing right now, not what the lifelong learning this kid is getting…So the student ought to be able to pass a test at the end of the school year with very good teaching, but if that's not happening because the kid has come to you so many grade levels below, then you almost feel bad pressuring the teacher, who you know can't move this kid five years in one year to get them to pass a test. So now your teachers are stressed out. Your administrative staff is stressed out because we keep talking about this test…I think that the stressors the superintendents placed on you were "these kids need to pass by any means necessary. I don't care if you bring them in after school, before school, between school, they need to pass." That's the negative part of it.

The stress she feels from the superintendent's level to perform makes Kelly much more thoughtful about how she delivers those messages about passing the tests back to her staff. She says, "what I see the superintendent doing, that's now what I want to do to my team. It doesn't work."

In John's example, he described a superintendent whose lack of influence went far beyond what John perceived to be ineffective, but rather went deep to challenge one of John's

core values: integrity. John described how he did what he felt was right, regardless of what he saw his leader doing and he decided in his mind that he wouldn't stay in that situation for long. He said the following:

> The second superintendent…was all about personal survival for political means…he didn't demonstrate integrity. I didn't know that at the time, but it didn't take me long to figure it out that integrity was not a word that he could spell, and so I fell back on my previous training…I was going to do what was the right thing to do and I was going to keep my integrity intact. I also realized pretty quickly that wasn't going to last very long and it didn't. I stayed two years in that situation. What I learned out of that is that was one of the experiences, again, that solidified it for me, because I did stick to what I knew was right.

The principals in this study spent so much time in the interviews sharing examples of why the superintendent's beliefs, knowledge, and practices do not influence them that I had to ask, "so who or what does influence you?" To that question, the effective principals in this study seemed to light up as if I'd finally asked the right question. Their responses are detailed below.

Other influences. In the section describing principal's perceptions of the superintendent's impact on student academic achievement outcomes, participants in this study shared their belief that teacher have the most direct impact on student achievement outcomes primarily because of their close connection with students in the classroom on a daily basis. A similar line of thinking was evident in principal's responses to the question of who and what influences their beliefs, knowledge, and practices. For example, principals in the study shared their thoughts regarding the influence their teachers, students and leadership teams has on their

beliefs, knowledge, and practices. As it relates to the influence of teachers, Kate described the following:

> There's some phenomenal, not even just teachers but many of them have just chosen like, "I don't want to be a principal. I don't want to be an administrator. I don't want to be a professor." They've just chosen that. They feel like this is their path. So for me, I'm just thinking like, "I got the best of both worlds here." I mean, I have adults around me that are amazing, you know, that bring talents that I can't even dream of. Like I have a teacher, she could stop and just paint for a living and sell whatever she paints. You know, and she decides she wants to share that with kids, just, "Hey, y'all. I'll do it for free because I love it." Who does that? I feel like they're my big influencers that kind of drive me.

Kate discussed how her teachers influence her to want to be the best example of leadership. She explained how she's careful about the decisions she makes because she acknowledges how her decisions reflect her values and beliefs. She says the learning she seeks is so she can be the best leader she can be and pass her knowledge along to others. "I just want to be the best for them because they give the best to our students each and every day", Kate proclaimed.

Mary explained that her influence comes from the people around her, but the greatest influencers on her beliefs, knowledge, and practices are the kids. She said the following:

> I would say that I think my influences kind of come from the people around me. I think that we forget how bright some of our kids are, and not reading bright, math bright but just in all of these different ways …I got two books on my desk sitting here from a kid that I need to read and I need to mail it back to him. It's just these little comic books but

> he's been developing these for two years…I don't know how many editions this is, but he expects me to read them and put a sticky on it with some comments and send it back to him over the summer and I'm just thinking, how are you not influenced by that? How are you not driven by making sure that kid is in a place where he can do that. Where he can feel free to come to his principal's office and say, "Hey, you want to read these two books for me?" I just feel like any kid should be able to have that opportunity. So kids influence me a lot.

John took a slightly different approach to the question, one that still quite similar to Mary's response regarding the way kids influence her work. He shared that when he feels he is doing work for kids that will last a lifetime and the impact that work has the potential to have on future generations. John explained the following:

> The second motivation you have to have to work here successfully is you've got to personally be motivating, you've got to feel good about what's happening to kids. That's it's a good thing to try to get through the kids and educate them and prepare them, to make the world a better place in their time that you'll never see." In other words, I'm still very much motivated by the fact that I think the gift that doing a great job with a 15-year old, teaching them to think, teaching them to have some compassion and teaching them to look at their world and use their talents to try to make the world better. That 15-year old will probably still be doing that 40 years from now. I won't be here 40 years from now, but I'm still motivated by the fact that my grandchildren will be and I want the world to be a good place for my grandchildren.

John is influenced by the work he is doing for kids and the potentially for his work to have an impact that extends beyond the classroom, and even beyond the school building. He believes the true impact of his leadership is his ability to create other leaders who will positively influence changes in the community and beyond.

Kelly, who attributes a great deal of her success with being able to surround herself with an effective leadership, described one of her influencers as being the members of her leadership team have on her leadership. She shared how their desire to grow and improve through continuously seeking feedback also pushes her to continuously improve her own practices so she is better positioned to give to them the knowledge that someone once gave to her. She explained the following:

> I have three on my admin team. They stretch me every day because they didn't decide to take positions on the team, like, "I have this job and I want to do it." When they come for their feedback, it's like, "What else do you have next to teach me?" and I got to be thinking about like, "Okay. What else do I have? What's my next aim for this person?" So that's a stretch because I'm having to think about their development and I feel like I have all of these people -- I got three. They want to go into leadership and they're not just like, "Hey. Sign off on my papers." It's just like, "Can I sit with you and talk through the budget?"…they just want the intricate details because they just want to learn. So it keeps me, I think, in a position of being a teacher, which is helpful because then I feel like if I get flat, or if I don't want to do that anymore, then I have all of these people that are depending on me to do that for them. I had those people to do that for me so I feel like I have a responsibility to pour into them what was poured into me.

For Kelly and Sarah, it is less about the who and more about the what. They each described some aspect of the intrinsic motivation they believe acts as their greatest influencer. Sarah explained the following:

> Numbers, your job day-to-day, I got to make sure that it happens…I think principals are result-driven now…because they don't really look at you as a person. They look at your number, and how your campus is performing…because they don't know what's happening on the inside. The only thing they know is that number. This is [redacted] number. This was [redacted] number. This is just your number, that's all. I mean, that's what's really driving me. I guess, because I'm like, "That's a good question", because I'm like, I don't know whose beliefs is inspiring me right now or changing the way that I do.

Outside of her members of her leadership team, Kelly discussed how she is influenced mostly by her own intrinsic motivation. She shared her belief that most effective principals are driven by their own desire to be the best and do the best work they can do for kids. She explained the following:

> Most of it is intrinsic as well because it really doesn't take anyone to kind of get the drive going. You can't create this exceptional principal. You can give him all the necessary tools, but what makes you go around each day? This is not easy work. You can't say, "Oh [redacted], get up, you got to go to school. You've got to be a principal." I'm like, "Let's go. Let's go get it today." No one's telling me that. No one's coming, "Hey. It's going to be a great day when you make it to [redacted]"…Nobody's giving me a motivational speech every day.

Lisa discussed the influence her School Support Officers (SSOs), who act as principal's direct supervisors, and the Chief Schools Officers (CSOs), who supervise the SSOs. During the interviews, she explained how the influences these individuals have on her practices are a result of the relationship they have built with her and the trust these individuals have placed in her as a school leader. She explained:

> The superintendent does not influence me. The people that influence my work in terms of being a good employee are my SSOs and my Chiefs. What impacts me is what my direct supervisors know because they are the people I am going to run to. The superintendent, he can come and go. For example, when [redacted] said, "it's your hiring practices", she had no idea how insightful that was. I had to write it down and I remember it every time. She knows me. I trust her. She has a relationship with me. She knows my work. She knows I work hard, but I have no relationship with [redacted]... I have no relationship with [redacted]…I don't have any problem with it, but at the end of the day, I'm not going to be moved by you. I feel like that's a product of the type of district I work in. It's a very large district.

For Lisa, relationship and trust work together to create influence, a concept she says she keeps in mind and works on with those that she supervises at the school level.

This section described the themes among the perceptions of the effective principals in this study on the influence of superintendent's beliefs, knowledge, and practices on their own beliefs, knowledge, and practices. Four themes were explained, which included the following: aligned beliefs; examples of what not to do; influence in the formative years; and other influences. The next section explains how effective principals in this study make sense of the

superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices as it relates to their ability to be successful in a large, urban school district.

Making sense of superintendent's instructional leadership

This section describes how the effective principals in this study make sense of the superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices in a large, urban school district. The data analysis yielded four themes used to describe how the participants make sense of the superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices as the leader of a large, urban school district. The themes are as follows: beliefs are the driver; instructional leadership is a necessity; instructional knowledge preferred; and the superintendent's success. The section below describes each of the three themes in detail.

Beliefs are the driver. In discussing how they make sense of the superintendent's beliefs, principals in the study shared their experiences and perceptions regarding the way in which superintendent's beliefs system needs to align to the needs of a large, urban school district. One of the factors principals pointed to in considering the work of a large, urban school district was the poverty levels. Another was the existence of achievement gaps among different populations of students. Principals discussed the need for superintendents to have a strong belief around all students learning as a driving force to be able to impact change for all students. Kate discussed her belief that the desire to impact change in the lives of students is the primary motivation for individuals who decide to take on the task of leading a large, urban school district. She said the following:

> A lot of times, wonder, "Why would anybody take that next step to want to be a superintendent?" And I think ultimately, at their core, it is about someone that is no any

different from some politicians and they move in that direction because they want to change something. They see something that they feel like they can put their stamp on or help change. So I think that at their core belief that there is that piece of I want to help change something. I think that it builds in you over time. Like some people right away they know that that's what they want to do…I think when they started from the classroom and they've kind of moved through the ranks, it's a place where I can impact some larger change. I've had the ability to do that in my classroom, at a campus level, maybe in some district department, but now this is an entire district. I honestly think it gives them the drive to do their jobs.

Sarah argued that the type of work that needs to happen an urban school district is very different from that of a suburban school district. She urged superintendents considering leading an urban school district to first acknowledge the difference and then to only seek out positions where their beliefs are aligned with the needs of the districts. She explained the following:

> I'm thinking that their beliefs have to be aligned up to what the district needs. It's like you can belief that, "Oh I believe that every child should do this or every child should do that," but it may not be beneficial to your work. So superintendents seek out, hopefully, a superintendency that aligns to what they believe should be happening in what they--because if you sign up for an urban school district, you're going to face different challenges than what you're going to face in a regular school district…you know the type of work the needs to happen in an urban school district, so you have to have some sort of a belief system around the type of work that you're getting ready to encounter because It's going to be different than what you're going to encounter at a suburban school district

because instructionally, I think you need to be more sound in an urban school district.

When asked to elaborate on what she believes to be the key differences in the issues facing urban school districts versus those in suburban school district, Sarah had the following to say:

> Most urban school districts encounter high poverty, community issues. You have teachers, but turnover, your mobility. Those are things that are going to be pretty consistent across urban school districts. So you're not going to experience a big time poverty level out in the suburban school district. You worry about different things than what they worry about in the suburban districts so you come in with already believing what you believe about education, and how you want to basically change the world when you come into an urban school district. So as a superintendent, you have a different focus and different challenges.

Lisa discussed the idea of a superintendent having a full grasp of what he or she is getting into when they make the decision to lead an urban school district. In fully understanding the needs of the role, the issues the district is facing as it relates to instruction, and the political forces superintendents face in trying to serve all students, Lisa discussed the need for superintendents to be realistic about the goals they set out to accomplish during their tenure. She said the following:

> I mean, I think it's a massive job…It's almost like you're never quite successful because ever superintendent that I've ever known believes all kids can learn but they end up leaving the district and there's still something that needs to be fixed or changed. So you have to be able to accept some of that too. You have to ask yourself, "In my time period that I think I'm going to spend as superintendent, what truly can I impact? What's

realistic to impact?" knowing that you're going to leave with some things that still need to be done.

Mary discussed her desire to see a superintendent in place that has a heart for the work and the type of children being served in urban school districts. Her vision is to see a superintendent lead the district who has an authentic desire to have a positive impact on children's lives and one who believes and cares for all children. Mary wanted to know how the district could attract a superintendent with those qualities and characteristics. She explained the following:

> I would like to pose a question rather than tell you something about it. My question is how do we attract more caring, concerned, I mean, really caring, not just lip service, people into education so that if they want to be a superintendent, be a superintendent because you want to make a positive impact on the lives of kids and that that stays your central focus. It doesn't become how much money you can make or how many deals you can cut with different vendors, or whatever. It's just that you really devote your being to it.

For the principals in this study, making sense of the superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs begins with having a superintendent whose belief system aligns with the needs of the district. Their subtle challenge to superintendents to reflect on their beliefs and truly search within themselves whether or not they believe in the success of all children, regardless of their background and income levels, was powerful. It demonstrated yet another reason each of these principals have been able to be successful in consistently improving academic achievement outcomes for students throughout the years.

Instructional leadership is a necessity. When asked if superintendents in large, urban

school districts needed to be an instructional leader, each of the principals quickly responded, "yes," all for reasons related to the ability to make sound instructional decisions for students. Kate shared how having a superintendent who is an instructional leader "helps to guide directions that they're setting for the district and guide the message they're sending out to various parts of the district." Kate came back to the idea of the superintendent surrounding himself with experts that he can trust while also having enough broad knowledge to filter through the information those individuals are providing. She said the following:

> So while you have people out there who are the diggers and you want them to be the expert, you still need to have a foundational understanding so you can decipher what they're bringing to you. Is it good, relevant and necessary information for the course they want to take the district on?

Sarah, Mary and Kelly's thinking were all in line with Kate's. Specifically, Sarah discussed the need for superintendents to know what some of the "key components needed in order to move a large, urban school district." She argued that if the superintendent "has no background of the instructional component, how are they going to know what to do and what direction to take the school district."

Lisa said being an instructional leader as a superintendent in a large, urban school district is necessary "due to the fact that they're dealing with students who have instructional gaps and they need to be making decisions to ensure the initiatives they push out at the district level target those gaps." She argued instructional gaps will exist among the student populations in most urban school districts, therefore superintendents in these setting most know what to do when encountering those situations. John's response was aligned to both Sarah and Kate's; however,

he added to their thinking the idea that while the superintendent does not have to be "the absolute expert in curriculum or expert in instruction, it comes back to an argument that's been around for 35, 40 years that anyone can teach in a school." John said in his experiences, that argument does not hold up to be true. He said, "Well, let's get a CEO from the corporate world and out them in charge of schools. We've tried that. It hasn't worked in the past. It's probably not going to work in the future."

Instructional knowledge helps. One of the themes among participant's responses to how they make sense of superintendent's instructional leadership knowledge in particular connected back to some of the perceptions and experiences they shared at the start of the interviews regarding specific knowledge and in the absence of that knowledge, the need to rely on the experts. Participant's expressed the need to have a solid instructional knowledge base, particularly when working in a large urban school district, due to the types of struggles superintendent's leading in this setting have to face, such as low graduation rates and high percentages of students reading below grade level. Sarah explained the following:

> Instructionally, I think you need to be sound in an urban school district because that's the core of how you're going to move the school district. In a school district that's not urban, it could be a community focus or it could be a political focus because that's the type of work. In an urban school district, it's a down and dirty instructional focus in order to move the school district. You have to ask yourself, "Can I get these kids to read? Can I get these kids on grade level? Can I get them to graduate?" I think they have to know how to navigate and empower others to get the work done because it's a lot of work that needs to happen.

When explaining how she makes sense of the superintendent's instructional leadership knowledge, Kate described her beliefs that having more instructional knowledge increases the likelihood of the superintendent's success. She expressed her thoughts around the superintendent being more credible, acceptable and trustworthy when they have an educational knowledge and background principals can relate to and connect with, particularly when tough decisions have to be made and buy-in from principals in needed. She explained the following the following:

> I don't know if I make sense of it or I just feel like it increases their chances of being successful. You know, like those knowledge pieces that we've talked about or some of the skill sets they need to come with or whether that foundational knowledge that they need to come with. I think that it makes them more, not necessarily approachable, but accepted by more of the stakeholders. I think that in itself, the knowledge factor can really hurt you or it can be that thing that helps you to be more successful, especially when you're making decisions that might be controversial decisions or not supported by all. You have to really be able to me to show that you have a good understanding of why, what is going to impact, what is not, where it's going to lead us, kind of thing. At the end of the day… as a principal, it's hard to listen to someone coach me that has never been a principal…I try to take the leadership or the management piece that I can take from it, but a lot of times I'm just thinking, "You couldn't last a day" because the management piece of it is off on the side. It's not the every day of the school. The more knowledge they have and experiences and education in their background, helps them create more trust or buy-in among stakeholders, which helps them be more successful. When you come in without that, I think you have a higher ladder to climb.

When superintendents do not have the experiences and educational background along with a specific knowledge base, Kate says “surrounding yourself with experts who really know their particular field” is one practice that will help a superintendent ensure his or her own success. Kate explained that they have to be people who will push back on the superintendent’s ideas in order to work towards the nest outcomes for students and for the district. She said the following:

> I think it [hiring experts] will help them to be more successful, but I think that you also have to know what you don't know and know when in any given situation, you're really not the leader... You're not the best equipped to send the message, deliver the message, etc. and let it be that other person…So, I think you have to surround yourself with people that are experts, but I also think you have to surround yourself with people that are not going to be like, "yes, sir”, all the time because that's not going to work to your benefit either.

Lisa also mentioned the need for superintendents to have a “plan B,” which is knowing how and when to surround themselves with experts they can consult for the answers they need. She said the following:

> They have to be knowledgeable enough to be able to select the right individuals to get the job done, because it's a lot of work that needs to happen. Identifying the key players that they're going to need in order to make sure their district goes around instructionally has to be at the forefront of most of their minds.”

In short, principals in this study make sense of the superintendent’s instructional knowledge by following two lines of thought: the superintendent’s chances of success increase when they possess the instructional knowledge needed to address the instructional issues inherent in

working with an urban school district, but when they don't have that knowledge, they have to be able to surround themselves with the right people who have the knowledge to get the job done.

The superintendent's success. A notable observation in the participant's responses to how they make sense of the superintendent's instructional leadership is that each of their responses related in some way to how they view the success of the superintendent. In some cases, the principals in the study gave tips and suggestions related to the superintendent's practices and their level of success and in other cases, the principals described what makes them view the superintendent as being successful. Mary, for example, described how her perceptions of the superintendent's success are based strictly on rather or not she feels like the superintendent supports her as principal. She said the following:

> How do I make sense of it? I think that if I personally feel supported, I feel like he's been successful. It becomes more personal though, right? I'm not looking at it on the side. If I want to be on the outside looking in and I'm not an educator, I would say, "Are the kids doing well?" but personally and in a principal role, if I feel supported…then the superintendent is successful. I do think culture plays a big role, and it depends on if people are happy, then he was successful. If they're not, then he wasn't successful

Lisa, on the other hand, had a very different view of the superintendent's success, one in which she directly connected the success of students to that of the superintendent. She said the following:

> If they were producing positive results, then I think there was success in that…I think it's a big plus if, culturally speaking, they've got both hand in hand, and it's a positive culture, and we're producing. I think that you can have a very strong instructional leader

who produces great results, and there's a negative culture, but that doesn't mean he wasn't successful if the data moved…More scholarships, more passing students, more kids going to college, all of that kind of stuff is data that says he was successful.

Sarah and John discussed what John termed "the keys of success" for superintendents. Their thoughts focused on practices superintendents should engage in that would help to ensure their success. For John, it came back to his earlier thoughts regarding the need to get all stakeholders on the same page and moving in the same direction to meet a common goal. He said the following:

> It's setting that direction and what that looks like, and a superintendent's skills are based on pulling all the people together to get that done, and I don't think that is different in a large district or in a small district. The only difference is in a larger district you work through more layers of people. You still have to use the same skill. You still have to influence other people. You still have to create a common vision. You still have to agree a relationship. You still have to be perceived as someone who's trustworthy, someone who's going to stand for the right thing, and someone who has a degree of knowledge about what we need to do, and I think that's a standard. Those are the keys to success.

Sarah's thoughts on the superintendent's success were centered on messaging from the superintendent, consistency from the top levels and utilizing the district's resources to directly support the superintendent's priorities. She explained the following:

> Well, I think if superintendents would focus instructionally and funnel their resources to focus on instruction…I believe that they can get the results that they need. It's how long are they going to focus on that component to ensure that that is happening so they give it

> time because everything is a sense of urgency, it has to happen now… So time is the tough piece in education…but in order to really impact the instructional practice, there has to be some consistency across the board. It has to be a message that's clearly communicated through the superintendent, and all of his things are funneled toward that to assure that it is a priority for the superintendent.

Much of what the principals in this study shared around how they make sense of the superintendent's instructional leadership connected back to their earlier responses which to me, highlights what the principals deem to be important when reflecting on the superintendent's beliefs, knowledge, and practices. Some of the commonalities existed among the principal's discussions around the superintendent's beliefs and the need for them to be aligned to the work of an urban school district as well as aligned to their practices. Another commonality was evident in the way principals make sense of the superintendent's knowledge and their ability to successfully lead urban school district. In the area of practices, principals consistently discussed the need to hire experts, align resources, engage stakeholders, communicate effectively and work towards a common vision.

This section explained the themes related to how effective principals in this study make sense of superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices in large, urban school districts. Four themes were discussed, which included the following: beliefs are the driver; instructional leadership is a necessity; instructional knowledge preferred; and the superintendent's success. The next section outlines a summary of Chapter 4.

Summary

This study examined effective principal's perceptions of superintendent's instructional

leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices in a large, urban school district. In this chapter, a description of the six effective principals included in the study was provided, followed by an analysis of the participant's descriptions of instructional leadership. The next section described the effective principal's perceptions of superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices. The fourth section provided a description of the effective principal's perceptions of the impact of superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices on student academic achievement outcomes. The fifth section described effective principal's experiences and perceptions of the influence of the superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices on their own beliefs, knowledge, and practices as an instructional leader at the school level. The chapter concluded with a discussion on how the effective principals in this study make sense of the superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices in a large, urban school district. Each section presented the themes represented in the interview data, followed by a discussion of those themes. It should be noted that the names of the participants and the school district have been changed to ensure the participant's confidentiality. A discussion of the study, the conclusions drawn from the data and the implications for practice and further research are outlined in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions and Implications

This chapter synthesizes the scope of the study. It offers a discussion of the findings that were revealed through an analysis of the data, which was collected according to agreed upon methods, and in response to the research questions. The chapter is divided into the following sections: purpose of the study; research questions; participants' descriptions of superintendent's instructional beliefs, knowledge, and practices; the indirect impact of superintendent instructional leadership; the lack of influence; presentation of a conceptual model; limitations of the study; implications for further research; summary; and conclusion.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine effective principals' perceptions of superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices, and how they impact student's academic achievement outcomes and influence principal's instructional leadership. Findings from this research were needed to provide greater clarity to superintendents and school boards members alike around the role of the superintendent as an instructional leader and the specific beliefs, knowledge, and practices that principals perceive lead to an increase in student academic achievement and influence their own instructional leadership. Findings from this research can also add to the body of literature related to the superintendent as an instructional leader, which can be studied in educational administration and superintendent preparation programs.

Research Questions

This study examined the perceptions of effective principals on the instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices of superintendents, and how they impact student

academic achievement outcomes and influence principal's instructional leadership. For effective principals in a large, urban school district in Texas, this study answered the following research questions:

How do effective principals in a large, urban school district in Texas,

1. describe instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices of superintendents?
2. perceive the impact of their superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices on student achievement?
3. describe how superintendent's beliefs, knowledge, and practices as an instructional leader influence their own beliefs, knowledge, and practices as it relates to instructional leadership?
4. make sense of the instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices of their superintendent?

The discussion of the findings begins with a review of the data related to the first research question: Describe instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices of superintendents. While the participant's experience with superintendents was varied, each of their responses were situated in their experience in the large urban district, which was the setting for the study. The size of the district, with the breadth and depth of its organizational structure, precluded the participants' ability to describe that which they had not directly experienced or observed. The participants' responses as related to beliefs, for example, were quite limited. The participants' interaction with the superintendent was minimal, especially as it relates to direct interaction, which precluded them from being able to elaborate on and describe the instructional leadership beliefs of the superintendent. In contrast, when discussing the instructional leadership practices

of the superintendent, the participants, having witnessed the superintendent in action, could reflect on particular behaviors and offer more substantial perspectives, which are further discussed in the following sections.

Perceptions of the Superintendent's Beliefs. Participants of this study initially found responding to questions about their perceptions of superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs to be challenging. This was the case because they were unable to identify any particular instance in which their superintendents explicitly described or explained their beliefs. Participants could, however, share their assumptions about superintendent's beliefs based on their superintendent's practices. This way of thinking about superintendent's beliefs aligns directly to the findings and conclusions in the review of literature. Prior studies (e.g., Fairbanks-Shultz, 2010) have made explicit connections between the beliefs and practices of superintendents by demonstrating the ways in which superintendent's decisions are guided and directly influenced by their beliefs. Like participants in prior studies, the effective principals in this study made seemingly logical connections between beliefs and practices; however, they also discussed ways in which this connection was not always apparent in their experiences with their superintendents. Mary provided examples of ways in which the large, urban school district would be very different if superintendents practiced what they said they believed. She made sense of this disconnect by considering the political aspects of the superintendent's role, asserting her belief that politics are often to blame when a disconnect between practices and beliefs exist.

When beliefs and practices did align, participants were able to describe their perceptions of three beliefs held by the superintendents in their experiences. These three beliefs included

building relationships, coaching and developing principals, and the belief that all students can learn. The later, the belief in all students learning, was consistent with the findings of prior studies (e.g, Bussey, 2006; Fairbanks-Shultz, 2010; Griffin and Chance, 1994) examining superintendent's beliefs. Bussey (2006) wrote, "The most frequently verbatim repeated phrase across all interviews was that leaders must believe all kids can learn" (p. 5). Participant's perceptions of superintendent's beliefs around building relationships focused on their experiences with superintendents who recognized and celebrated principal's work in their schools, engaged in meaningful face to face interactions with principals and invested time in getting to know them as individual leaders. Participants also discussed their experiences with receiving coaching from their superintendents, in order to support principals in becoming more effective leaders. This coaching, in the participant's experiences, often came in the form of training and individual coaching conversations with principals.

Perceptions of the Superintendent's Knowledge. In their discussion of the superintendent's instructional leadership knowledge, participants in the study focused on the depth of knowledge required to be an instructional leader. Similar to the literature review on superintendent's instructional leadership knowledge, there were two differing thoughts: one focused on broad knowledge, and the other specific knowledge. It became evident from their responses that the elementary and high school principals were more concerned about the instructional leader's ability to relate to the role of the principal; what happens daily in schools, the leader's ability to understand enough about instruction to make sound decisions, and their ability to surround themselves with experts who can assist in making instructional decisions for the district. Their perceptions of the need for superintendents to have broad knowledge were

consistent with the literature (e.g., Eadie, 2003). The middle school principals, however, discussed their experiences with superintendents who were much more adept in their instructional leadership knowledge, specifically in Reading, in their understanding of school data, and in their ability to discern the characteristics of high quality instruction. The middle school principal's experiences and perceptions aligned more with the conclusions presented by Elmore (2000).

No literature exists that would give any indication as to why the views of middle school principals would differ so much from that of elementary and high school principals. As such, my only thoughts about the varying perspectives connect to my knowledge of the differing daily role functions of principals at each level. Elementary school state standards require students to be proficient in basic skills, which allows elementary school teachers and principals the flexibility of being less proficient in specific content areas, unlike their middle school peers. Like high school teachers, middle school teachers are often referred to as content experts. The best secondary teachers are highly skilled in a specific aspect of their content area and are only required to teach content aligned to their individual expertise. For example, in elementary school, Math teachers are general Math teachers who teach basic skills, whereas in secondary schools, Math teachers have a concentration on a more specific area such as Algebra or Calculus. One major difference that could account for the varying experiences between middle and high school principals relates to the differences in the organizational structures at each level. High schools employ department chairs who are often content experts that facilitate the professional development for their department, lead the collaborative planning sessions and provide coaching and mentoring to teachers on their teams. With this layer of instructional support existing under

the role of the Assistant Principal, high school principals can focus primarily on pedagogy when working with teachers rather than having to act as the content experts. Small and mid-sized middle schools, like the ones Kelly and Sarah lead, do not have this additional layer of expertise, putting more of the onus on them and their leadership teams to be the experts. The differences in the experiences of the principals at each of the three levels could account for their varying perceptions of superintendent's instructional leadership knowledge. It should be noted that eventually, towards the conclusion of the second interview, John did express the need for superintendents to have some specific knowledge. He described this knowledge as "something they've got to figure out."

Outside of principal's perceptions on the depth of the superintendent's knowledge, participants expressed similar views on superintendent's experiences prior to accepting the district's top leadership position. Effective principals in this study suggested superintendents who have served in the role of a principal, or at a minimum, worked in a school in some capacity, have increased credibility among principals. Their perception is that superintendents who understand the day-to-day aspects of a school, and who fully comprehend the various factors contributing to any school's student academic achievement outcomes, are better positioned to relate to principals, coach principals, and make instructional decisions for the district. Participants like Kelly believe superintendents who lack this experience tend to depend primarily on test results and are disconnected from the realities of schooling. These themes in the participant's perceptions align with the literature written on the topic of non-traditional superintendents taking over the helm in large, urban school district. For example, in an article on nontraditional school administrators, Bianchi (2003) wrote,

> The argument is often made that hiring nontraditional candidates to revive struggling school districts is merely a quick fix – a shot of adrenaline to an ailing system that quickly wears off. Critics also claim that school districts need more than just leaders, they need educational leaders who understand how children learn and how teachers teach as well as who can manage staff and run a big-budget operation. (p. 3)

With the findings of this study, the voices of effective, urban school principals can be added to the debate on rather or not nontraditional superintendents have what it takes to be successful educational leaders.

Putting aside the level of knowledge principals perceive superintendents to have, each of the effective principals in the study displayed a high regard for superintendents who acknowledge their personal knowledge gaps and hire experts to fill those gaps and help them make instructionally sound decisions for the district. The consensus was that no one knows everything and in a large, urban school district superintendents are more effective when they surround themselves with the right people. This finding was consistent with the literature on district superintendents, such as the study by Remland (2012) in which the factors leading to superintendent longevity in two of California's urban school districts were examined. The participants consistently referred to the size of the district as the focus of this study, making note of the idea that there was not an expectation among principals that the superintendent be an expert in every area. Principals in this study agreed such an expectation would be unrealistic and even uncharacteristic of an effective superintendent leading a large, urban school district.

Perceptions of the Superintendent's Practices. The review of literature cited several studies (e.g., Bredson & Kose, 2007; Davidson, 2005; Herman, 1990; Morgan & Peterson, 2000;

Murphy & Hallinger, 1986; Wagner, 2010; Waters & Marzano, 2006; Watts, 1992) that described superintendent's instructional leadership practices based on the data collected from principals, school board members, superintendents themselves, and other stakeholders in education. Communication and collaborative goal-setting was one example of the superintendent's instructional leadership practices described by the effective principals in this study. They explained the importance of aligning the work they do at the school level to the superintendent's vision and goals to provide clarity to all stakeholders around the instructional priorities of the school district. Principals in the study shared how critical consistent messaging is to helping them determine what is important and expected of them as school leaders. They described their experiences with superintendents who consistently messaged the same expectations and goals during principal's meetings, via email and other communication forums. Similar to findings in the literature (e.g., Conrad, 1994; Deal and Peterson, 1999; Kowalski, 2005), participants suggested this level of frequent communication, and the specifics around what is being communicated, helps to mold the district's culture. In noting that communication is a two-way process, principals such as Kelly and Kate, suggested the need for instructional leaders to engage all stakeholders in discussions about what they feel is working and what needs to be changed in the district before setting goals and expectations about instruction and student achievement. Participants like Lisa suggested the size of a large, urban school district makes it difficult to know whether or not collaborative goal setting is actually taking place.

Setting non-negotiable expectations for student achievement and instruction is another practice that surfaced in this study and in the literature review (Waters & Marzano, 2006). Participants explained how systems and supports help to define the superintendent's non-

negotiable expectations. As it relates to systems, principals suggested the implementation of district wide systems aided in the creation of uniform expectations among school leaders. They discussed one example; wherein, the teacher appraisal system currently being implemented sets the standard for teacher quality and expectations around what instruction needs to look like in the classroom. Additionally, principals explained the expectations resulting from the implementation of the district's Literacy By 3 Program, which communicates the expectation that all students completing the third grade be reading at or above grade level.

It became clear in the participants' discussion of their perceptions of superintendent's knowledge that the principals in this study do not expect the superintendent to have a deep knowledge of every aspect of the school district. Instead, the participants argued the need for superintendents to hire people who are experts in the areas where there is a gap in their knowledge. As such, another instructional leadership practice discussed by the effective principals in this study centered on their perceptions of how superintendents hire and manage experts. Principals suggested who the superintendent hires as the experts is critical because they are usually the individuals who work directly with schools in a large, urban school district. These hires are also important, according to the participants in this study, because these individuals are helping the superintendent make critical decisions about teaching and learning, which ultimately impacts student's success. Principals shared the importance behind superintendents knowing the areas in which they are not the experts and deferring to those who they'd hired to be the expert to make sound decisions for the district. In their experiences, the nature of a large school district makes it impossible for any superintendent to do everything, making the need to delegate and trust the experts to do their jobs even more critical to the superintendent's success.

The practice of aligning campus supports to district priorities highlighted the ways in which the superintendent makes decisions on how to utilize the district' resources to support schools in implementing the district's priorities. Principals shared several examples of this practice, one of which included how superintendents utilized district funds to implement a Math program with the goal of improving student achievement in that area. Another example focused on Literacy. Principals recalled their experiences with the trainings offered and the additional personnel deployed to their campuses to help implement the district's Literacy initiative. They discussed how the additional supports for certain district priorities reinforced the superintendent's expectations for student achievement and instruction. They understood that if money was being spent to help them implement a program and if additional resources were being funneled to the school to ensure the success of the priority, their job was to maximize the additional supports to ensure their campus was producing the desired results.

In the principals' explanations of the practice of monitoring expectations for instruction, it became clear that superintendents were not providing campuses with support and simply leaving rather or not those supports were working to chance. Like the participants in Waters and Marzano (2006), participants in this study discussed how superintendents engaged in the practice of monitoring expectations for instruction through school visits to provide principals with feedback and determine next steps for growth, analyzing teacher appraisal data as a measurement of teacher quality, and conducting curriculum audits. Principals highlighted the practice of monitoring expectations for instruction as one of the most critical components of the superintendent's work. As Sarah argued, superintendents must "get out and see what's happening in schools rather than solely depending on the data to tell each campus' story."

Explaining the Indirect Impact

This portion of the discussion on the findings focuses on the data related to the second research question: How do effective principals in large, urban school districts in Texas perceive the impact of their superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices on student achievement? The effective principals in this study did not perceive the superintendent to have a direct impact on student academic achievement outcomes for several reasons. The participants explained how the structure of a large, urban school district is such that principals do not always hear directly from the superintendent. According to the participants, the many layers of personnel between the superintendent and the school principal, such as the School Support Officer (SSO) and the Chief Schools Officer (CSO), means messages around expectations and priorities are often watered down or changed by the time they reach the school principal. Principals have a direct impact on teachers and in turn, teachers are the ones who have a direct impact on student achievement outcomes. Participants, such as Lisa, made it clear that because superintendents are not directly connected to students, they do not perceive them as having a direct impact on student's academic outcomes.

The participants described several ways in which they perceive superintendents to have an indirect impact on student academic achievement outcomes. Principals explained superintendents whose beliefs focus on instruction have an indirect impact on student's outcomes primarily because of the ways in which those beliefs guide superintendent's decision-making practices, as well as those of campus leaders. As John explained in his analogy of steering a ship, principals perceive the impact on student achievement, as a result of superintendent's beliefs around instruction to be slow. They described the impact as a change occurring over a

period time. This slow change is why participants suggested the need for superintendents to have a sustained focus on specific instructional priorities, rather than constantly changing direction. The constant change, participants like Kelly argued, produces a negative impact on student achievement outcomes. In these cases, the participants warn, superintendent's belief that instruction is at the core of the their work is not enough to produce positive outcomes for students.

Another way in which participants perceive the superintendent's indirect impact on student academic achievement outcomes is in the way they create systems of supports for schools. Principals, such as Kate, argued superintendents can talk about their beliefs and demonstrate their knowledge, but if they are not making decisions that put those beliefs and that knowledge into practice, neither have any impact on student's academic achievement outcomes. Some of the decisions the participants referenced in their examples focused on how superintendents utilize the district' resources to support schools. Resources were inclusive of funding, programming, personnel, and training. The use of resources, participants suggested, have an indirect impact on student achievement outcomes.

One final theme among principal's perceptions of superintendent's impact on student academic achievement outcomes centered on superintendent's knowledge and decision-making practices. Principals suggested the superintendent's knowledge has less of an impact on student achievement outcomes than their beliefs and practices when superintendents have the right people around them to help with the decision-making. In situations where this is not the case, principals argued the superintendent's level of knowledge is the key factor in deciphering rather or not their impact is positive or negative. In cases where the superintendents lacks the

knowledge needed to make instructional decisions, participants, such as John, suggested the impact is negative. Even though principals explained ways in which the superintendent's knowledge and decision-making indirectly impacts student achievement outcomes, they also noted it ultimately comes down to how principals communicate the superintendent's decisions to their staff and the ways in which they implement those decisions on their campuses.

Describing the Lack of Influence

This portion of the discussion on the findings centers on the data related to the third research question: Describe how superintendent's beliefs, knowledge, and practices as an instructional leader influence their own beliefs, knowledge, and practices as it relates to instructional leadership? Instead of describing ways in which the superintendent influences principal's instructional leadership, participants explained their perceptions of the lack of influence. The effective principals in the study argued that as experienced school leaders, their beliefs are already solidified. They seemed to be very clear about what they believe, and where they draw the line on practices they will and will not engage in based on those beliefs. The participants did describe a time in which they were influenced by the superintendent's instructional leadership. Many of those examples were derived from their early days in education as teachers.

As leaders, principals suggested they do not look for ways in which their instructional leadership can be influenced by the superintendent, but rather where their instructional leadership aligns with the superintendents, particularly in the area of beliefs. Principals found where their beliefs aligned with those of the superintendent, they were more motivated and inspired to carry out the vision and expectations of the district leader. Participants also provided

examples of ways in which the superintendent's beliefs influenced changes in their practices on their campuses. They used words such as "exciting" and "stimulating" to describe how invigorating it was to be led by a superintendent who shared their own beliefs and whose practice were reflective of those beliefs.

In instances where principals found the superintendent's beliefs to be misaligned with their own, participants made it clear that they were willing to go against the stated expectations in order to protect their school communities, and to ensure they did not compromise their beliefs. Principals discussed instances when they perceived the superintendent's practices to be examples of what not to do. One such example of what not to do was given by Kelly who talked about the superintendent's expectations for getting rid of ineffective teachers. Her practice is to provide struggling teachers with ample support and guidance to help them get better if they are willing to do so, whereas the superintendent she referenced seemed to express the expectation that school leaders terminate struggling teachers immediately. Based on Kelly's explanation of her experience, the superintendent did not believe the district had the time to wait for a struggling teacher to get better. The participants made it clear that they were unwilling to engage in practices they felt went against their beliefs and as Mary suggested, they were not afraid of losing their jobs because of it. They seemed to be very confident in their effectiveness and stood firm in the need to protect their staff and students from practices they perceived to be harmful to the school's culture and climate.

Although the participants did not have a plethora of examples to share around their experiences with the superintendent's influence on their instructional leadership, they did have a lot to say about individuals in other roles who have a great deal of influence on them. Some of

these individuals, as the principals in this study explained, included teachers, members of the leadership team, SSOs, and students. Participants described ways in which these groups of people make them want to keep building their knowledge base so they are in a position to share their knowledge with others on their campus. They explained their cautious approach to the decision-making because they want to set a good example for the other campus leaders and they recognize how their decisions reflect their beliefs. They discussed how knowing they are making a lifelong impact on student's lives influences their daily work and the desire to keep striving to improve for kids. Participants also pointed to their own intrinsic motivations in considering what influences their instructional leadership. They explained how they are driven by their own beliefs, goals, and expectations for themselves to be the best leaders they can for their students and the staff members who depend on them to be the best. Kelly best captured the essence of how principal's intrinsic motivation influences their instructional leadership when she said, "you can't create an exceptional principal, you can only give them the tools they need to be great."

Making Sense: A Conceptual Model

The fourth research question asks, how do effective principals in large, urban school districts in Texas make sense of the instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices of their superintendents? I was anticipating gathering responses that directly addressed the question; however, their responses were not categorical. As I heard the participants' responses during the interview, and listened to the recorded interviews, and analyzed the transcripts, I realized the notion of making sense was, in essence, the synthesis of the preceding questions and related responses. Making sense is the juxtaposition of superintendents' instructional leadership

beliefs, knowledge, and practices. When I attempted to categorize responses related to perceived superintendent beliefs, the responses were shadowed by ideas related to knowledge and practices; it was similar when analyzing for knowledge and practices. Additionally, the participants' responses often included references to how the superintendent may or may not influence or impact their work. Particular to a superintendents' instructional leadership, I suggest that the notion of making sense frames the entirety of understanding how effective principals in a large, urban school district in Texas perceive this leadership. Figure 1 illustrates my conceptual model for findings of the study. The model does not represent a linear process. The various elements discussed in the study are in constant interplay with one another.

A superintendents' instructional leadership influence and impact is not always recognized by a principal, they can be subtle and nuanced; yet, there are occasions when a principal acknowledges that both are fundamental to how they do their job. In the conceptual model, the egg-shaped area shaded in gray represents where a superintendents' instructional leadership influence and impact merge. It is also in this area where the superintendents' beliefs, knowledge, and practices are recognized albeit not equally.

Three circles in the middle of the conceptual model represent the superintendents' instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices. The data analysis revealed participants possessed less experience with the superintendent's beliefs, more experience with a superintendents' knowledge, and the most experience with the superintendent's practices. The three circles representing beliefs, knowledge, and practices are not equal in size to reflect the volume of participants' responses when discussing each.

The conceptual model encapsulates the findings of the study. While I may have asked questions specific to a superintendents' instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, practices, influence, and impact, the model illustrates that the relationship of the various elements is dynamic. It is not static, and in the case of a large, urban school district, because of its size and the breadth and scope of the organization, how the superintendents' instructional leadership is perceived reflects such a setting.

Beliefs. The conceptual model illustrates beliefs as the smallest circle. Participants had the least to say about their superintendent's beliefs. Why is this? ECRA Group (2010) published *Effective Superintendents*, which enumerates the practices of effective superintendents. The first item listed is vision and values, "which measures the leaders vision and commitment to excellence" (p. 5). Vision and values embodies the philosophy of the district, and how the various district functions are aligned toward the greater mission. I am curious that the participants may not be versed or familiar with the superintendent's beliefs due to the setting of the study, which was a large, urban district. The organizational structure is such that principals are two-to-three levels removed from direct contact with the superintendent. The challenge is for the superintendent to utilize ways; whereby, the vision and values of the district are clearly known and understood by principals. Lacking this, I suggest that the participants, meeting the profile of an effective principal, include in their professional repertoire a certain self-direction that includes practices, beliefs, and knowledge to guide their own work, regardless of any knowledge of district leader's articulated vision and values. In the age of accountability, strong self-motivated principals may lead campus efforts to surpass state performance standards; however, are the efforts of these principals aligned with the greater vision and values of the

district. The conceptual model illustrates the notion (the gray highlighted area); wherein, a superintendent's influence and impact have limited effect on how principals make meaning of their work. My study does not address the importance of a principal having full knowledge and awareness of the superintendent's beliefs; however, I wonder what the implications are for a healthy organization. Beyond the pressure of state accountability, I suggest the vision and values, the beliefs, of the district's top leader sets the organizational standards by which all principals carryout their professional duties. A superintendent's beliefs may initially reflect intangible ideas and values; however, I believe if the beliefs are to be more commonly known, they must be spoken of frequently, as part of the ongoing discourse that articulates that which measures student success.

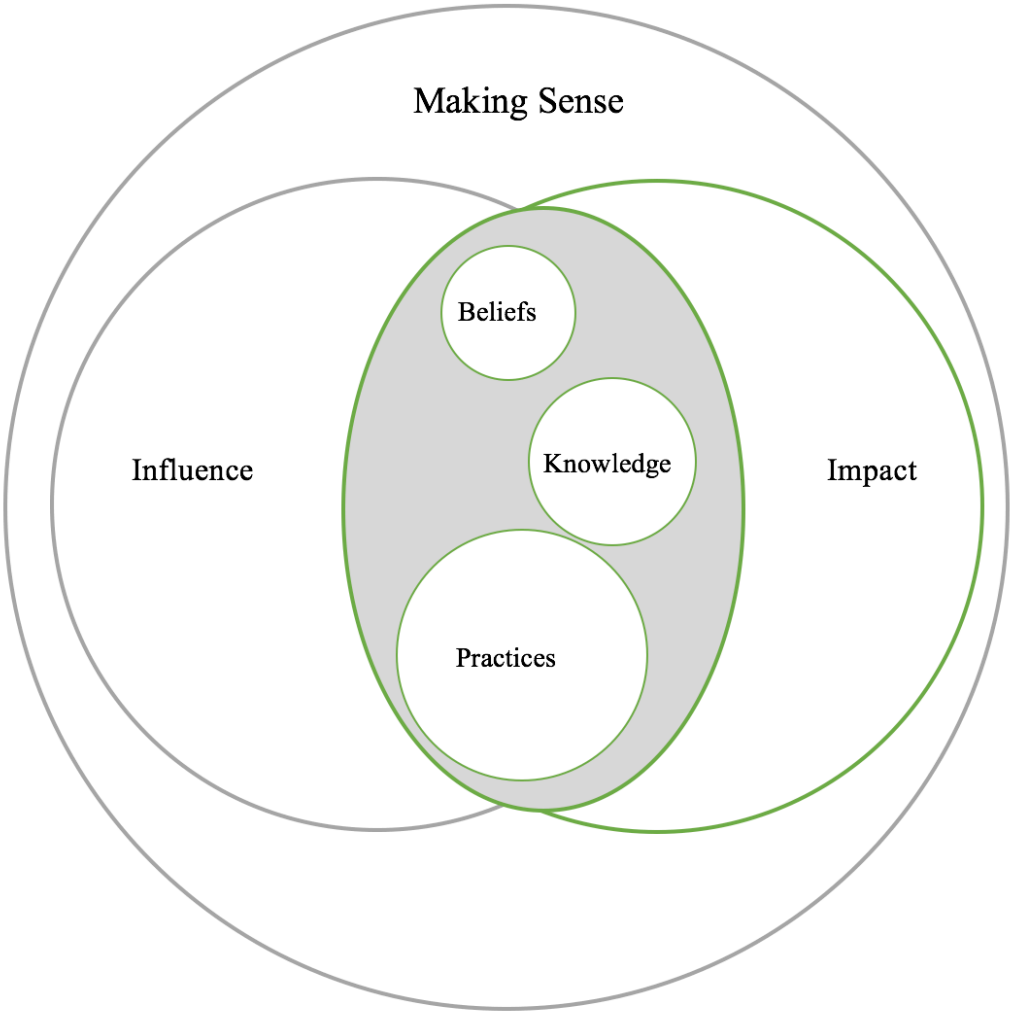
Knowledge. Second to vision and values, is a superintendent's core knowledge and competencies (ECRA, 2010, p. 5), which address the superintendent's instructional expertise. The participants were more familiar with the superintendent's knowledge of instruction. Was this because the superintendent demonstrated this knowledge more frequently? As stated earlier in the study, participants were able to recognize what the superintendent knew about instruction. I suggest this reflects a shared language; wherein, this common professional language is mutually understood. Accountability standards and their associated language, the lexicon, are essentially established by the state and commonly circulated best practices. Use of the language presumes a metric; whereby, participants can visualize and articulate when success is met, or not. Principals do not necessarily need to know a superintendent's philosophical perspective or beliefs in order to understand what may need to happen in order for students to be successful. The implication is that a principal must know what to do, and a superintendent can articulate this.

Data and research can provide knowledge, with essentially no need to know the superintendent's beliefs.

Practices. Knowing data and best practices, it becomes incumbent upon a superintendent to articulate a plan that prioritizes student success and effective instructional practices as the foremost goals of the district (ECRA, 2010, p. 8). "The superintendent plays an active role in evaluating the implementation of instructional programming" (p. 8), monitors student progress, and is data-driven. These practices are tangible, action-oriented, and much more easily identifiable. This is the participants' lived experience; thus, the most prominent of the three inner circles of the conceptual model.

In my conceptual model, there is an imbalance in size of the three circles: Beliefs, Knowledge, and Practices. I suggest this reflects the participants' lived experience of that which might be considered tangible versus intangible. Beliefs, vision, and values in and of themselves, are intangible. They are philosophical constructs that may be expressed in words, but lack a quantifiable nature. In our age of accountability, with metrics to assess student performance, how important is it for a principal to espouse or understand a district's vision or the leader's beliefs. It's obvious every district has a vision and mission, and every district leader has beliefs, but this study has demonstrated that there are principals who are considered effective, based on accountability metrics, who minimally possess an awareness or knowledge of their superintendent's beliefs. The literature consistently includes vision as the first of elements that must be in place for an effective organization, but based on this study, as illustrated by my conceptual model, I offer the opportunity for another researcher to validate the role of vision in instructional effectiveness.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model



Limitations

This study is a qualitative examination of effective principal's lived experiences and

perceptions on the instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices of superintendents in a large, urban school district in Texas. A concern of the study relates to the process of member checking. As described in Chapter 3, member checking is a technique used to "determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings through taking the final report or specific descriptions or themes back to participants and determining whether the participants feel they are accurate" (Maxwell, 2008, p. 196). At the conclusion of the first round of interviews, individual transcripts and corresponding themes were emailed to each participant. Four of the participants participated in the member checking process by responding via email with their thoughts regarding areas that needed to be clarified and with additional information. One of the six participants called and shared additional information and clarifications over the phone. One of the six participants did not respond. At the conclusion of the second round of interviews, the same process was followed; whereby, I emailed the transcripts and corresponding themes to the participants, however, this time, none of the participants provided responses. As such, member checking occurred throughout the course of this study on a limited basis, not to the full extent suggested in Maxwell (2008) and other authors such as Lincoln and Guba (1985). This limitation may or may not have impacted the findings of the study.

Implications for Practice

Actions speak louder than words. Looking at the findings of this study through the lens of this well-known expression can assist superintendents and school board members alike in answering the question, "so what." It is not a coincidence that participants provided almost twice as much data related to their perceptions of superintendent's practices than beliefs and knowledge combined. As it relates to practices, superintendents must engage all stakeholders in

the goal-setting process, which includes listening to what each stakeholder group deems to be important to the overall success of the district. After instructional priorities have been identified, the next level of work is to align the district's resources and funnel support to schools. Funding, personnel, programming, and training are each viewed as a type of support.

Once school supports are in place, it is important for superintendents to frequently monitor instructional non-negotiable expectations and priorities. One way of doing this is by conducting school visits and providing feedback to principals based on the observations made and data collected. Superintendents should be aware of how face-to-face interactions, such as school visits, help to build trusting relationships with principals. It helps principals feel like they are more than a data point and that the head instructional leader of the school district acknowledges there is more to the data that must be seen in order to be understood.

In most cases, school boards have the responsibility of hiring the district's top leader. Based on the findings of this study, school boards should consider the implications of hiring a superintendent without a background in education, especially if the candidate has never been a principal. School boards and potential superintendents should reflect on the needs of the school district and the specific knowledge and beliefs one would need to possess in order to effectively meet those needs. Where this is a misalignment between the district's needs and the belief of the candidate, open and honest dialogue needs to occur before moving forward in the selection process. If hired, superintendents must reflect honestly on their own knowledge gaps and hire experts they can trust to help them fill those gaps.

Goal-setting is a conversation new superintendents have with their school boards almost immediately after being hired. They work together to define what success looks like in

relationship to the district's overall needs. For the participants of this study, success means making gains in student achievement for all students and doing so while maintaining a positive working environment. Success also means engaging stakeholders and the experts in the decision-making and goal-setting processes. It means getting all stakeholders moving in the same direction, working towards a common vision.

Implications for Further Research

This study was built around specific variables as related to how effective principals were defined, the type of school district setting the context for the study, the tenure of the effective principals included in the study, and the experience levels of the effective principals included in the study. The altering of these variables sets the stage for further research on effective principal's perceptions of superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices to be conducted. Principals in this study attributed a notable amount of their responses to working in a large, urban school district. Further studies may want to explore effective principal's perceptions and experiences of superintendent's instructional leadership in smaller, suburban school district that lacks the numerous layers between the superintendent and the principals in the organizational structure. Assumingly, principals in smaller, suburban school districts have increased levels of interactions with the superintendent along with more direct access to the superintendent, which could potentially change their lived experiences and perceptions of the superintendent's instructional leadership. A similar study with effective principals in suburban school districts may yield valuable information for both researchers and educational stakeholders alike.

This study sought to understand participant's perceptions of the impact superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practice has on student academic achievement outcomes. A more in-depth examination of any one of those specific beliefs, knowledge, and practices effective principals believe impact student academic achievement outcomes and the ways in which they impact those outcomes would be a worthy endeavor. Researchers may also want to conduct a more extensive study into who, and what, influences effective principals' beliefs, knowledge, and practices. In this study, participants discussed the influence of teachers, students, administrative teams and direct supervisors have on their instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices. They also discussed ways in which their own intrinsic motivation influences them to grow and improve their practices, continually increase their knowledge base, and be mindful of the alignment between their decisions and beliefs. Examining the "how" and "why" behind these influences would add great value to the current body of literature on this topic.

Summary

This chapter began by revisiting the purpose of the study and its research questions. The research questions were followed by a discussion of the study's themes, which were outlined in Chapter 4. The conceptual framework explained in the literature review provided guidance for the portion of the study examining superintendent's practices; however, it neglected to provide any insights on the superintendent's beliefs and knowledge. As such, the introduction of a new conceptual model followed the discussion of the study's themes. The new conceptual model provides a visual representation of the role beliefs, practices, and knowledge play in principals' perceptions of the superintendent's instructional leadership. The participants acknowledged ways

in which superintendent's beliefs and knowledge influence the superintendent's practices, and in some instances, principal's practices. The physical interactions, the conversations, the tangible experiences, defined participant's individual realities and perceptions of the superintendent's instructional leadership. As such, greater attention was given to the superintendent's practices, over beliefs and knowledge. The new conceptual model also demonstrates how participants perceive the concepts of impact and influence to be in constant motion while simultaneously experiencing the various aspects of superintendent's instructional leadership. After the discussion of the new conceptual model, the limitations of the study were revisited. Finally, the implications for practice and further research were discussed. The next section concludes the study.

Conclusion

While past studies have examined superintendent's beliefs (e.g., Deal & Peterson, 1999; Bussey, 2006) and practices (e.g., Murphy & Hallinger, 1986; Herman, 1990; Watts, 1992; Waters & Marzano, 2006; Bredeson & Kose, 2007), each of these concepts was examined in isolation. Furthermore, while the subject of superintendent's instructional leadership knowledge has been discussed and debated in the literature (e.g., Elmore, 2000; Stein & Nelson, 2003; Eadie, 2005), there have been no studies conducted with the express intent of examining the concept of superintendent's knowledge. This study contributes to the literature by examining beliefs, knowledge, and practices concurrently, without prioritizing one over the other, and giving equal attention to each in the formulation of the research and interview questions. The concepts of impact and influence further add to the uniqueness of this study as neither has been considered in preceding studies, specifically as it relates to superintendent's instructional

leadership knowledge. Engaging principals as the sole participants also provides a distinctive contribution to the literature. Principals represent the middle ground in the field of education. They are uniquely positioned to look up at the superintendent and back at their school communities all at once because, ultimately, they are accountable to both the superintendent and the school community for the academic success of the students they serve.

In recognizing the culture of high stakes accountability and public scrutiny for both principals and superintendents, and the detailed intricacies of the superintendent's role, my primary goal in conducting this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the superintendent as an instructional leader through the experiences of effective principals. I believe the findings of this study led me to a greater understanding and appreciation for the role of the district superintendent,

and the unique set of complexities that exist in leading a large, urban school district. An unintended consequence of this study's data collection process, particularly the face to face, one on one interviews, was the level of in-depth reflection participants engaged in throughout the process and after it had concluded. They often commented that the superintendent's instructional leadership, specifically the concepts of impact and influence, were topics they'd never deeply considered. It is my hope that as a result of this study and its findings, educational stakeholders, particularly superintendents, school board members, and local and national policy makers, will find themselves in a state of deep reflection that will in turn, spark a meaningful dialogue on the superintendent as an instructional leader in large, urban school districts. It is my personal belief that reflection is a catalyst for change. Change that magnifies instructional leadership while minimizing the focus on politics and management, can only inspire school leaders, and produce

the necessary conditions for improved student academic achievement outcomes in our nation's urban schools.

Appendix A: Initial Principal Interview Protocol

1. How long have you been a principal? (Background question)
    a. Follow-up: How long have you been the principal of this school? (Background question)
    b. As the principal in this school district, how many superintendents have you worked under? (Background question)
2. Describe how you would define instructional leadership.
3. How would you describe your experiences with (each) superintendent's instructional leadership?
    a. What benefits have you experienced as a result of the superintendent's instructional leadership?
    b. What challenges have you experienced as a result of the superintendent's instructional leadership?
4. How would you describe the instructional leadership beliefs of superintendents? (Aligned to Research Question [RQ] 1)
    a. Follow up: How do you believe these instructional leadership beliefs positively impact you as an instructional leader at the school level? (Aligned to RQ 1)
    b. Follow up: How do you believe these instructional leadership beliefs negatively impact you as an instructional leader at the school level? (Aligned to RQ 1)
5. How would you describe superintendent's knowledge of instructional leadership? (Aligned to Research Question [RQ] 1)

a. Follow up: How do you believe the superintendent's knowledge of instructional leadership positively impacts you as an instructional leader at the school level? (Aligned to RQ 1)

b. Follow up: How do you believe the superintendent's knowledge of instructional leadership negatively impacts you as an instructional leader at the school level? (Aligned to RQ 1)

6. How would you describe the instructional leadership practices of superintendents? (Aligned to Research Question [RQ] 1)

c. Follow up: How do you believe these instructional leadership practices positively impact you as an instructional leader at the school level? (Aligned to RQ 1)

d. Follow up: How do you believe these instructional leadership practices negatively impact you as an instructional leader at the school level? (Aligned to RQ 1)

7. Describe the impact of superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs on student academic achievement outcomes? (Aligned to RQ 2)

a. Are there specific beliefs that you perceive to have more of a positive impact than others? If so, explain why.

b. Are there specific beliefs that you perceive to have more of a negative impact than others? If so, explain why.

c. Is the impact of these beliefs on student academic achievement outcomes direct or indirect? Please explain.

8. Describe the impact of the superintendent's instructional leadership knowledge on student academic achievement outcomes? (Aligned to RQ 2)

a. Is the impact of this knowledge on student academic achievement outcomes direct or indirect? Please explain.

9. Describe the impact of the superintendent's instructional leadership practices on student academic achievement outcomes? (Aligned to RQ 2)

b. Are there specific practices that you perceive to have more of a positive impact than others? If so, explain why.

c. Are there specific practices that you perceive to have more of a negative impact than others? If so, explain why.

d. Is the impact of these practices on student academic achievement outcomes direct or indirect? Please explain.

10. What else would you like me to know about superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices that I have not asked about? (Aligned to RQ 2)

Appendix B: Secondary Principal Interview Protocol

1. Additional questions based on first round of interviews.

2. What does it mean to you to be an instructional leader?

3. What does it mean to you to be led by a superintendent that is an instructional leader? (Aligned to RQ 3)

   a. In what ways, if any, do you believe the superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge and/or practices have assisted you in becoming an effective principal?

   b. In what ways, if any, do you believe the superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge and/or practices have hindered you in becoming an effective principal?

   c. How have the superintendent's beliefs, knowledge, and practices influenced your own beliefs, knowledge, and practices?

3. How do you make sense of the instructional leadership beliefs of superintendents? (Aligned to RQ 4)

4. How do you make sense of the instructional leadership knowledge of superintendents? (Aligned to RQ 4)

5. How do you make sense of the instructional leadership practices of superintendents? (Aligned to RQ 4)

6. How do you make sense of a superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge and practices and their ability to be successful in their role as the district's leader? (Aligned to RQ 4)

7. Is there anything you would like to add that you didn't tell me before?

Appendix C: Consent for Participation

Title: Effective Principal's Perceptions of Superintendent's Instructional Leadership Beliefs, knowledge, and practices

Introduction

The purpose of this form is to provide you information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to participate in this research study. The person performing the research will answer any of your questions. Read the information below and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether or not to take part. If you decide to be involved in this study, this form will be used to record your consent.

Purpose of the Study

You have been asked to participate in a research study about effective principal's perceptions of superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices. The purpose of the proposed study is to examine effective principal's perceptions of superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices and how they impact student's academic achievement outcomes.

What will you be asked to do?

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

- Participate in interviews

- Review transcribed data from the interviews

This study will take place in one initial face-to-face or phone interview of approximately 60-minutes in length and one subsequent face-to-face or phone interview of 30 minutes or less. The study will include up to 12 study participants.

Your participation will be audio recorded.

There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this study.

You will receive no direct benefit from participating in this study; however, findings may be used to inform the instructional leadership practices of current and aspiring superintendents.

Do you have to participate?

No, your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate at all, or if you start the study, you may withdraw at any time. Withdrawal or refusing to participate will not affect your relationship with The University of Texas at Austin (University) in anyway.

If you would like to participate, please provide a verbal consent to the researcher. You will receive a copy of this form.

Will there be any compensation?

You will not receive any type of payment participating in this study.

How will your privacy and confidentiality be protected if you participate in this research study?

Your privacy and the confidentiality of your data will be protected by the researcher referring to you with a neutral alias, not disclosing any information you share to other participants, ensuring the details of the data cannot be traced to participants, and all data will be locked in a secure location.

If it becomes necessary for the Institutional Review Board to review the study records, information that can be linked to you will be protected to the extent permitted by law. Your data will not be released without your consent unless required by law or a court order. The data, which will be masked, resulting from your participation may be made available to other researchers in the future for research purposes not detailed within this consent form. In these cases, the data will contain no identifying information that could associate it with you, or with your participation in any study.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be audio recorded. Any audio recordings will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the recordings. Recordings will be kept for 2 years and then erased.

Whom to contact with questions about the study?

Prior, during or after your participation you can contact the researcher **Rona Simmons** at **312-402-0747** or send an email to **Simmons.rona27@gmail.com** for any questions or if you feel that you have been harmed.

This study has been reviewed and approved by The University Institutional Review Board and the study number is 2017-02-0105

Whom to contact with questions concerning your rights as a research participant?

For questions about your rights or any dissatisfaction with any part of this study, you can contact, anonymously if you wish, the Institutional Review Board by phone at (512) 471-8871 or email at orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu.

Participation

You have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and you have received a copy of this form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time. You voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

Appendix D: Recruitment Email

Dear Prospective Participant,

My name is Rona Simmons, and I am a doctoral student at the University of Texas at Austin in the Cooperative Superintendency Program (CSP). I am conducing a research study as part of my doctoral degree requirements. My study is tentatively titled: Effective Principals' Perceptions of Superintendent Instructional Leadership Beliefs, knowledge, and practices. This email is an invitation to participate in this research study. The purpose of this research is to explore effective principals' perceptions of their superintendent's instructional leadership beliefs, knowledge, and practices. I am seeking to interview up to 12 Texas public school principals who have served as a principal for a minimum of seven years and during that time, demonstrated remarkable school leadership marked by continuous high student academic outcomes.

Participation in this study will require one initial interview of approximately 70-minutes in length in addition to one subsequent interview of 30 minutes or less. Interviews will occur at a time and place convenient for your and will be audio recorded. Your participation in this study will be strictly confidential and any data containing identifying information about you, your school or your school district will be masked or excluded from final study reporting. After two years, the digital interview recordings and transcribed data will be deleted.

By agreeing to participate in this study, you will be giving your verbal consent for the researcher to include your responses in her data analysis at the time of your first interview. A

Waiver of Documentation of Consent will be provided at the time of the interview, and after reading it, you may verbally consent. Your participation in this research study is strictly voluntary, and you may choose not to participate without fear of penalty or any negative consequences. You will be able to withdraw from the study at any time, and all interview responses will be deleted if you choose to withdraw.

By participating in this study, you will contribute to the current literature on the role of the superintendent as an instructional leader. No compensation will be offered for your participation. If you have any questions, you may contact me at (312) 402-0747 or my dissertation chair, Dr. Ruben Olivarez, at rolivarez@austin.utexas.edu. Any questions about the research can also be directed to the university's Office of Research Support at orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu.

Thank you for your consideration,

Rona Simmons

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